LPM for Associates: The View from Ground Level

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Successfully implementing Legal Project Management initiatives understandably focuses first and foremost on the folks driving the bus – on the roles and responsibilities of partner-level performers: client-relationship partners, project managers, practice group leaders, client team leaders, etc. Considerably less time is spent teaching LPM to associates or, for that matter, thinking about what the worker bees think. This is a serious oversight. If you want LPM to work in your firm, we urge you to walk a mile in your associates’ shoes.

Different Folks, Different Strokes

In training with senior-level lawyers, we typically define LPM as:

A systematic approach for efficiently scoping, planning, managing and controlling legal work within agreed time, budget and mandatory performance requirements.

This entirely accurate but rather abstract definition doesn’t say anything about how things look to a living, breathing associate. For the people who actually perform much of the heavy lifting, a better LPM definition might be:

LPM is an approach to assigning me tasks, delegating responsibility to me, managing my work, giving me reliable feedback, and planning team communication, that:

1. Connects me with the whole team and loops me into the whole engagement.
2. Diminishes the differences among how various partners do things (and want me to do things).
3. Provides me with a clear sense of what I’m supposed to do and when I’m supposed to do it.
4. Helps me keep my work on time and on budget.
5. Seeks my input about better ways of doing things, as well as identifying barriers, bottlenecks, and budget-busters.

You detect the pattern here? Like all of us, lower-level project performers tend to be self-referential, interpreting projects, process and progress in terms of how it impacts them as individuals. But since those self-references define things like buy-in, morale, resiliency, commitment and tenacity, you’ll do well to factor them into your project leadership and management.

Six Easy Pieces

Here are six particularly notable insights about associate perceptions and attitudes.

- 360° Perspective: Associates resent the hub-and-spokes approach that characterizes so many partners’ management styles – the one where the partner at the hub knows and controls everything and none of the team members sees the big picture, knows the overall project budget, or collaborates with all the other worker bees out there on the rim. Associates want the big picture, not just the micro view; they say they feel more involved in projects where the strategic objectives are explained, and more committed to projects whose sweep and scope they understand.

One large law-firm partner confirmed this point most aptly: “If an associate feels detached from the team’s efforts, they will not be there for you when you really need them.”
• **Do It My Way:** A corollary to the inefficient and non-communicative hub-and-spokes management style is the tendency for every partner to do everything in his or her own unique way. Associates often tell us that false starts, do-overs, write-downs and dressing-downs result from a lack of consistency in how their work is assigned, managed and measured. Put differently, they love the consistency that LPM can offer.

• **Basic LPM Education:** Associates really like LPM training that demonstrates the basic LPM building blocks (*scoping, project planning, managing work, monitoring/measuring progress, and post-project review*), but that also looks at these functions from the associates' perspective. In successful training workshops, associates are taught that they are not just passive performers, but that they bear “contributory responsibility” for
  - making sure they fully understand their assignments;
  - receive objective and timely feedback; and
  - can manage their own work effectively.

In short, associates must learn that they too have to communicate better and collaborate more.

• **You're Never Too Junior to Think About the Client:** For many junior-level lawyers, the “client” is a distant abstraction. Associates are taught that they are not responsible for understanding the client’s business, needs and priorities, that client relationships live out there in partner country. This perspective is profoundly misguided, and associates report a real hunger for information about all aspects of the law firm-client relationship. Client-centric thinking is the wave of law’s future; it cannot be introduced too soon.

• **Early Warning System:** Similarly, as ground-level performers, associates are often the first to see early signs of scope creep, redundant assignments, work process inefficiencies, communication babel, performance bottlenecks, road blocks, or other budget-busters. Associates tell us that the main reason their uniquely pragmatic insights are not appreciated is because they are seldom sought: “We see things that more senior lawyers don’t see, but no one ever asks us how things look from our end.”

• **Proactive Perspective:** Given the opportunity to perform and excel, today’s associates are energetic, highly-motivated can-do kids. Unfettered by slavish adherence to traditional thinking, they are stimulated by change, innovate more readily than their elders, think more comfortably outside the box, and embrace rather than resist technology. For them, law’s “New Normal” is a fascinating new challenge, rather than a mine field.

Let Me In, Coach

Motivational consultants confirm two basic principles of human nature: 1) Participation fosters engagement and, conversely, engagement fosters participation. 2) Motivation does indeed correlate with work quality.

Yet partners seldom ask associates for their perspectives and suggestions, defaulting to the “when-I-want-your-opinion-I’ll-give-it-to-you” style. Before turning an indifferent shoulder to your ground-level performers, consider this bit of feedback we received from a young associate after an LPM training session we designed specifically for associates:

*As a younger associate, I thought the training today was great – an informative, helpful and in-depth overview of practice management that will help me for a long time to come. I especially enjoyed the overview of practice management from both the partners’ and clients’ perspectives. This will help me think of ways to add value to my case team, as well as during client development – for current clients and for my own business development down the line. Thanks for the engaging and thoughtful time!*