

The Leading Question of Learning.

By Gerry Riskin

Many people seem to think that skills such as management and leadership cannot be learned; you are either born with them or not. This article examines the case for management and leadership training in Professional Service Firms.

I had a Partner once who firmly believed that all leadership and management abilities are a matter of natural talent and cannot be learned. For example, he felt that Partners divide themselves into two basic types – those who are born leaders and those who are not. It was, in his view, a waste of time to try to improve the skill of the born leader by extra training, and complete nonsense to try to instil any management skills into those whom he considered to have no natural ability. For those reasons, he would never attend Training courses himself (he was a born leader of course), and was equally unhappy to allow any of the lesser mortals in his team to attend. Not surprisingly, neither my Firm nor I agreed with his radical and arrogant view, and we soon parted company! At the other extreme, another partner in a Law Firm told me quite recently that he thought that though he might have some management skills, marketing ability was not one of his natural skills areas and he did not intend to try to develop here; he clearly wanted to remain in a comfort zone in which an abundant supply of interesting work would somehow magically appear.

Behind these stark and extreme examples lies an interesting debate about which much has been written – can leadership skills be taught and learnt, or do you have to be a “born leader”? You can probably guess which side of the debate I lean towards, but even so, I have found that the whole question of management and leadership training in Professional Service Firms is not as simple as it seems.

Right up front, any Professional Service Firm which is committed to develop management and leadership skills needs to recognise the big difference between basic management skills and visionary leadership skills. The former encompasses the skills, competences, know-how and behaviours required to develop good functional management. The latter relates more to the ability to create a vision in a fast changing world, to motivate individuals and teams, to lead them through change, and to foster innovation. But in both cases, partners in Professional Service Firms can in my view develop and hone the necessary skills. All such partners will have already demonstrated their brainpower to become partners in the first place. They will already have or should be encouraged to acquire at least baseline skills across the leadership and management spectrum. They hopefully can be persuaded to accept that good management and leadership is absolutely pivotal to success. They perhaps understand less clearly that the need for more and better abilities is bound to increase. The relentless pace of change will see to that, along with more demands for compliance, better service, different regulatory structures, and the challenge of globalisation and competition. The problem, however is, that although these issues seem to be widely recognised in the Professional Service Firm sector, little progress is being made. Management and leadership deficiencies continue to be cited as causes of poor performance.

I have noticed six particular problem areas which often occur in Professional Service Firm training programmes

- Fee-earning is allowed to take precedence over training, with both Partners and fee-earners cancelling out on Training dates as soon as even the most minor client commitment intervenes
- Training and development in ‘soft’ skills is not as valued as training and development in technical areas; partners and fee-earners can be sceptical about the benefits of training.
- There is insufficient recognition that most professionals will only learn, or change their behaviours, of their own volition and not at the will of others.
- Partners and fee-earners who are sent on external courses are often expected to share what they have learned internally, but very rarely get round to doing so; and there are often few mechanisms or disciplines within Professional Service Firms to police this.
- The supply of training opportunities is mixed in quality, often inflexible and lacks practical application. In addition it is often not sufficiently tailored to meet the specific needs of the individual or Professional Service Firm
- The demand for training and development in management and leadership skills from the Professional Service Firm is unclear and unfocused, with the result that the return from the training investment is not as good as it should or could be.
- What I hope is noticeable is that at least three of these problem areas illustrate common cultural/behavioural problems in many Professional Service Firms and highlight what emerge as the acceptable or normal behaviours in the organisation. Perhaps more importantly, all the listed problem areas are themselves issues of leadership.

There is room in the training wardrobe for both the ‘tailor made’ and ‘off-the-shelf’ approaches. And there are many excellent course providers with increasingly sophisticated management and leadership training programs which can supply much of the

formal learning which is needed.

But every firm is different and no single training template can ever be enough. What I find so fascinating is the huge overlap which exists between strategy and training. As soon as Firms start to ask themselves some of the really key questions about their capabilities and the relationships between those capabilities and overall performance, they find again and again that they are uncovering a whole host of Training and Development needs at every single level of the organisation. What is also clear is that a customised approach is often necessary to meet the needs which have been identified. Over the last two years, I have found that some of my most interesting and rewarding work has been

Both my colleagues and I have designed, facilitated and led Partner Training and Development Sessions and Workshops across a whole range of Management and Leadership Topics. I have found repeatedly that my experience as a solicitor, former Managing Partner and accredited trainer has been immensely valuable in making those programs relevant, practical, focused and valuable.

Some Key Capability Questions

1. Do we have the ability, at Firm, Team and individual level to develop a clear sense of direction for our organisation, and to frame some clear and achievable objectives?
2. What are the skills gaps and shortcomings currently hindering us from achieving our goals? Will we be able to do tomorrow what will be necessary then, but which may not be necessary now?
3. How confident do we feel about our ability to make and see through the tricky decisions and priorities in our firm?
4. How motivated are our people to move up a gear? What do we need to do to increase their ambition?
5. Do we have the ability to encourage or require our people to learn and develop? Do we even accept the need to do this?
6. What are our communications skills like? What are we like at giving feedback?
7. Does everybody in positions of management understand their roles and responsibilities, and do they have the tools, know-how and time to fulfil those responsibilities?
8. What is our staff turnover like? Do our people enjoy their work? Do we understand what we need to do to improve in these areas?
9. Are we comfortable that we and our staff are team players or are there more than the occasional spot of undermining or selfish solo performances? Do we know what needs to be done to improve teamwork?
10. How can we improve delegation and supervision?
11. What are we like at sharing what we have learnt throughout the firm?
12. How can we improve our ability to win and keep business?
13. Do we know what measures we need to take for our clients to appreciate and value our services?
14. How well do our people manage their accounting and financial responsibilities?
15. To what extent are we aware of the risks which face our business and do we have the capability and resources to manage such risks?