

EMPOWERING YOUR EMERGING LEADERS:

The 5 Essential Skills Your Attorneys Need Next

by Gina Sauer

AT A GLANCE

- 11 min read
- Emerging leaders need the skills of delegation, feedback, project management, business development, and the ability to lead meetings.
- Objective, practical, and teachable frameworks can help with mastery of these skill sets.
- This article provides training curriculum tips designed for empowering your emerging leaders.



By the time associates reach the mid-to-senior level (however that is defined at your firm), they are expected to have some mastery of technical legal skills and competence in their practice area. To continue to grow professionally and advance in their careers, however, these emerging leaders must add at least five non-technical skills to their toolkit: **Delegation, Feedback, Project Management, Leading Meetings, and Business Development.** Professional development managers can create a roadmap for them with a training curriculum that focuses on these five essential competencies.

The challenge is that these are five areas which associates often do not feel confident or comfortable exercising, not only because they didn't learn them in law school, but because these skills frankly feel a bit too "squishy." Lawyers are taught to think in concrete frameworks and apply a logical sequence to their work; when they analyze a case, write a brief, draft a transactional document, or determine whether a particular regulation is applicable, they use a prescribed template or process. That is why it is so important to emphasize to emerging leaders that although these so-called soft skills may seem amorphous and are utilized in situations that can feel inherently subjective, there ARE objective, practical, and teachable frameworks they can apply to master these skill sets.

1. Delegation

Delegation is, of course, crucial to the overall health of the firm in that it ensures the development of the next generation of associates. It also ensures that work is being performed by the appropriate level of legal professionals, thus providing the most efficient client service. Learning to delegate effectively, however, also greatly benefits emerging leaders themselves. It is a critical step in positioning them to take on more responsibility in cases and matters, not to mention a skill set which will be increasingly evaluated in their reviews.

As Rochelle Weiner, Senior Professional Development Manager at McDermott Will & Emery LLP, advises attorneys, "Delegation is important because, when done effectively, it affords your team opportunities to grow, builds trust within your team, and opens up your schedule to work on higher-level projects."

Learning to provide thorough information when delegating is more important now than ever — and challenging — in the hybrid work

environment. Many firms report seeing more missteps in the delegation process and an increasing number of assignments veering off track due to a lack of clear direction. This is not surprising given our current reality. In the pre-pandemic world, even if a delegator provided limited details for an assignment, the delegatee could easily run into them in the hallway or pop into their office to seek clarification. Those natural, convenient interactions don't happen as often anymore, so it is incumbent upon delegators — especially those associates new to the role — to provide comprehensive instructions for assignments from the outset.

Training Curriculum Top Tips:

- Provide emerging leaders with checklists of items they should include every time they delegate an assignment (i.e., timetable, available resources, expected format, etc.). Provide your most junior associates (those being delegated to) with the same checklists and encourage them to ask questions when they

receive assignments that are lacking key details; this will provide an added layer of assurance that delegators are providing thorough information.

- Include a framework for *pre-delegation* assessment in your training, i.e., how to determine what is appropriate to delegate and to whom.
- Include best practices not just for assigning projects at the outset but for appropriate shepherding throughout the life of the project and course-correcting when projects go off track.

2. Feedback

The flip side of delegation is feedback. It is essential that emerging leaders learn to close the loop on assignments they have delegated by providing feedback that not only identifies what could be improved, but that affirms what went well so that behavior can be repeated on future assignments.

Getting mid-to-senior level associates, who are new to the delegation process, to provide feedback can be challenging for two main reasons: a) it is too easy for a busy delegator to move on to the next thing on their plate, rather than pausing to provide feedback on the project, and b) no one likes providing what may be perceived as negative feedback, especially those mid-to-senior level associates who

Many firms report seeing more missteps in the delegation process.

Continued on page 25

have limited experience doing so. Professional development managers can help emerging leaders overcome this reluctance by making a convincing case for why providing ongoing feedback throughout the year (not just during formal reviews) is so important, and by providing such associates with a comfortable, practical framework to approach feedback. This framework should be designed to be applicable whether the associate is providing feedback to support staff, associates more junior than them, or other team members.

While feedback is a crucial part of the talent management process of a law firm, like delegation, it is also a self-serving skill for emerging leaders to develop that will greatly benefit not just the associates to whom they give the feedback but themselves. If the goal of delegation is to build a “Go To” team of more junior associates and support professionals the emerging leader can rely upon, the goal of feedback is to ensure that with each assignment, the emerging leader needs to do less and less editing of work product and shepherding of assignments, as their Go To team learns to understand their expectations.

Training Curriculum Top Tips:

- Make sure emerging leaders new to the roles of delegator and feedback giver understand the firm’s performance expectations for the level of associate or other legal personnel to whom they are providing feedback; this will ensure

that their feedback is appropriate and realistic.

- Provide emerging leaders with *specific* examples of constructive versus destructive, direct versus indirect, and actionable versus non-actionable feedback statements.
- Include a step-by-step template for providing verbal feedback that includes components such as finding out what went well and what could be improved, seeking the delegatee’s reaction, exploring new approaches to address specific types of mistakes, and setting goals for the next assignment.

3. Project Management

Delegation and feedback are early building blocks of the bigger picture skill set of project management, which includes higher-level leadership functions such as creating case or matter strategy, staffing matters appropriately, and applying cost-effective practices to provide exceptional client service. While your attorneys may not be ready to be the lead lawyer on complex matters the day they graduate to mid-level status, it is never too early to start exposing emerging leaders to the broader concepts of project management.

Whether or not your firm employs a formal legal project management (LPM) methodology or uses specific case management software, emerging leaders will benefit from having a



solid grasp of general project management concepts as they approach partnership consideration and beyond, including:

- defining the scope of a project,
- creating a case/matter plan,
- scheduling tasks and determining estimated time for completion of project components,
- using data from past, similar matters to predict needs and costs,
- budget control,

- risk mitigation, effective client communication, and
- leading a team.

Training Curriculum Top Tips:

- Tailor the timing of your project management training to your firm’s size and culture. If your firm’s structure is such that mid-to-senior level associates may find themselves taking on significant responsibility for relatively complex matters, include project management in your training curriculum sooner

Many professionals don't realize that leading meetings is a "teachable" skill.

rather than later. If such responsibility typically does not come until the partnership level, project management training could be part of your new partner orientation activities. The key is to make sure attorneys begin building these skills *before* they are responsible for larger matters.

- While project management lends itself to formal training, one of the best ways to learn the intricacies of the process is through observing. Incentivize your senior attorneys to provide project management mentorship to their more junior counterparts.
- If your firm uses some type of LPM software or technology, make sure your project management training curriculum includes instruction on what it does and how to use it.

4. Leading Meetings

Meeting facilitation is a vital skill that can set associates apart. As Maddy Kershek, Senior Manager, Professional Development at Loeb & Loeb LLP points out, "Leading a meeting is an obvious opportunity to demonstrate leadership abilities. Having the talent to effectively lead meetings — to manage conversations so they are organized, focused, productive, and inclusive — is an invaluable skill set that can really help emerging leaders stand out and make a good impression on colleagues and clients alike."

Interestingly, many professionals don't realize that this is a "teachable" skill. On the contrary, leading meetings is a skill that works particularly well when approached as a practical process that can be broken down into logical steps. Such a framework can be applied to most of the scenarios in which emerging leaders may find themselves: matter update meetings with clients, internal firm committee or team meetings, and meetings of external/community organizations in which they hold leadership positions.

By providing training in this area, professional development managers can prevent the panic an associate feels at that inevitable moment when a partner on their team says, "I've just had a conflict pop up. Can you lead the meeting this afternoon?" Better yet, when they feel confident in this skill, mid-to-senior associates can demonstrate their emerging leadership capabilities by proactively volunteering to lead an upcoming meeting or at least a portion of it (as appropriate for the subject matter and significance of the meeting relative to the associate's level of expertise, of course).

Training Curriculum Top Tips:

- Create handy checklists for pre-meeting logistics that emerging leaders can use when they are called upon to organize and lead meetings at the last minute.
- Offer best practices for facilitating meetings, including how to guide and

focus discussions, handle Q&A, and encourage all participants to speak up. The latter is an especially important (and challenging) consideration in remote/hybrid meetings.

- Include advice and examples of how to create time block agendas to keep meetings on track.

5. Business Development

Like all the skills discussed so far, business development (BD) is not a skill that comes naturally to most mid-level associates, but it is critically important, and it can be taught and learned. "Succeeding in the practice of law in the law firm setting requires lawyers to master the art of relationship-building and embrace business development from day one," according to Kari Jensen Thomas, Senior Manager of Business Development Training and Alumni Engagement at Faegre Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP. She advises implementing a progressive business development curriculum that is tailored to the lawyer's level of experience and that leverages their individual strengths.

"Laying the foundation for a business development mindset will help lawyers hone the habits and competencies that will empower them to eventually build a practice bigger than themselves," she adds.

Continued on page 27

Firms have found success with extended curriculums that start with training in basic networking skills, and then evolve into more specifically client-focused skills, like identifying client needs and pitching the firm, and by combining a spectrum of different types of BD training opportunities including mock or “friendly” receptions where associates can practice their networking skills in a low-pressure setting, shadowing during client pitches, and highly individualized coaching.

Training Curriculum Top Tips:

- Include public speaking and presentation skills in your BD training, particularly in the context of remote and hybrid presentations. While relationship-building activities like golf outings, dinners, and other in-person events are slowly making a comeback, many firms say that speaking at online CLEs or providing remote/hybrid, client-specific training has become a dominant BD activity.
- Many emerging leaders say they are not sure what they should do if they actually were to bring in a new client, so include a “nuts and bolts” component in your BD training. Do they need a partner on the file? How do they run a conflict check or open a new matter? Walk them through the mechanics of your firm’s protocol.

- If your firm has core competencies or benchmarks that include BD expectations and goals, make sure your BD training curriculum aligns with those expectations.

Summary

Providing a clear path for your mid-to-senior level associates means making them feel confident with the demands of their emerging status as leaders. By integrating training in delegation, feedback, project management, leading meetings, and business development, professional development managers can help emerging leaders overcome the reluctance they feel about taking on these new responsibilities and ensure not only their continued growth and advancement, but the overall health of the firm. The key to promoting the development of these important communication and management-based skills is providing a structure and framework that is understandable, comfortable, learnable, and accessible for your emerging leaders as they master these competencies. +



Gina Sauer, JD, is Founder and Principal Consultant of ATTAVITA. Gina provides training and coaching to attorneys focusing on workplace communication and presentation skills,

including many of the competencies discussed in this article, through her consulting firm, ATTAVITA. She has over 25 years’ combined experience as Director of Attorney Recruiting & Development at a law firm, Assistant Dean for Career Services at a law school, practicing attorney, and career coach. Gina is also a professional actor. She served as NALP President in 2000-2001.

It is never too early to start exposing emerging leaders to the broader concepts of project management.