

Thinking About Talent Management in Law Firms

“Lawyers today will tell you that a law firm should run ‘like a business’... . A business dependent on the intellect of its workforce ought to invest heavily in talent management and leadership development Law firms are trying to be more ‘business-like’ but fail to adopt many of the basic talent management principles upon which excellent institutions are built.”

– Lauren Stiller Rikleen, “Law Firms Need To Take Care of Their Talent”, *Harvard Business Review*, July 2012

The Law Society recently asked my consulting team and I to look at talent management and succession planning in law firms in Singapore. There have been many changes in the legal industry in Singapore recently. These range from an increasing complexity of the industry, new ways of providing legal services, and challenges with talent retention, we were briefed. A look through the academic journals, management articles about law firms and through informal conversations with lawyers, we’ve gathered that talent management isn’t actually something that law firms in Singapore pay very much attention to. This is a bit of a pity - the connection between good talent management and its impact on business is well documented. Talent management, if done right (or at all), provides a pipeline for leadership succession, improves the talent bench strength, and increases employee engagement. A robust talent management strategy helps to make the law firm an employer of choice, helping the firm to attract the right talent.

We have applied what we know from our body of work in this area from other industries to the legal industry. These are some factors to think about in talent management in law firms:

How is Talent Defined?

We asked a handful of lawyers this question - what is talent in the legal industry? They all had a similar reply. “Talent equals rainmaking ability. If you can bring in new clients, you can do what you want.”

In the last 10 years, organisations have started to adopt a broader definition of talent. Talent is people with the skills, attitudes, knowledge, and experience and leadership potential, who have what it takes to enable a firm to achieve its objectives and deliver the vision the partnership has created for itself (*Talent Management for Lawyers: A Hands-*

On Guide, p.2). Rainmaking in a law firm is important. So are other attributes and competencies such as the ability to lead and motivate others, strategic planning, business management, and project management. These abilities and competencies, and many others, contribute to the sustained success of a firm.

It Begins with the Firm’s Organisational Strategy

Talent development needs to be closely aligned to a firm’s organisational strategy. What is the firm’s plan to achieve its short, medium and long-term goals and objectives? What makes your law firm different from the rest? Why should a client choose your law firm? Talent development supports the organisational strategy. It equips lawyers, legal practitioners, and team members with the prerequisite skills and qualities to fulfill the organisational strategy. And it is part of the organisational strategy to attract and retain good people, without whom there is only the organisational strategy and no outcomes from it.

The Definition of Talent Needs to be Clearly Communicated throughout the Firm

There is no such thing as a secret talent management strategy or programme. Everyone in the firm needs to know how talent is defined in the firm, how it is developed, and how it is rewarded. It needs to go into the annual performance appraisal, and needs to form the basis of compensation, benefits, and promotions.

This is the hard part. Very often, talent management is opaque at best. Everyone sort of knows what the senior management is looking for but no one is really sure. How talent is defined, managed, and rewarded shapes employee behaviour and it influences corporate culture. Team members are more engaged when they know what is expected of them, and what attributes and competencies will take them to the next level in the firm. Otherwise there is a constant sense of second-guessing what the bosses and the firm want, and it is easy for the senior management to come across as being unfair or even showing favoritism.

Talent Management Needs to be Structured and Systematic

A lot of learning in firms usually happens on the job. Young lawyers get chosen to work with the more experienced

lawyers and they learn along the way through hard knocks and through observation. A good talent management strategy needs to be systematic and structured. Team members need to know when and how their potential is going to be measured and reviewed. There should also be a learning and development road map, preferably individualized, to help team members discover and leverage of their strengths and be aware of and downplay their vulnerabilities. Besides technical legal skills, firms should also think of equipping team members with skills on emotional intelligence, how to network, make rain, run the business, manage stakeholders, formulate business strategy, lead and coach other people. It is useful to think about implementing milestone leadership and development programmes in the first few years of a team member's career with the firm.

Talent Management Needs to be Reviewed Regularly

Just as the firm's organisational strategy is constantly evolving, it is also important to review and evaluate the talent management strategy so that the two strategies can be aligned. This is usually done by the firm's senior leadership during its annual strategic planning meetings.

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SeraphCorp, in partnership with the Law Society of Singapore, facilitates leadership development programmes for law firms in Singapore. The modules are from the WSQ Leadership and People Management (LPM) framework (at the Specialist Diploma level) and are contextualized for the legal industry based on focus group discussions and discussions with leading legal practitioners in Singapore. The modules are government-funded.

SeraphCorp will be conducting "Talent Management and Succession Planning for Legal Practitioners" on 15 and 16 August 2017. In this 2-day workshop (WSQ Develop Managers and High Potential Employees through Organisational Talent Capability Review, LPM-DEV-501C-0), participants will learn about the principles of talent management, developing high potentials, and succession planning and how they can develop a talent strategy for their firm. Through the learning activities, participants will get to develop game-changing talent strategy to recruit, engage, develop, and retain the right talent for their law firm.

