

TEAM LEADERSHIP SKILLS

As a mid-level associate you are no longer expected to sit alone in your office and turn out work product. Law firms look to mid-level associates to manage the project. Partners expect good leadership and management skills from mid-levels, while junior associates look to the mid-level associates for guidance and feedback.

On March 23, David Cruickshank, Director of Professional Development at Paul Weiss Rifkind Wharton and Garrison LLP in New York, and head of the Continuing Professional Education Institute, speaking to an audience of mid-level associates at the City Bar's Professional Development Breakfast Workshop, "Project Leadership" imparted specific tools and techniques to become a more efficient and successful manager of people and projects.

Completing a project on schedule and within budget requires good organizational, management and planning skills. As a project leader, says Cruickshank, you need to engage the team members, do the planning, delegate tasks, and evaluate and learn at the conclusion.

The Team

Before you can effectively lead your team you need to get your team to feel like just that, a team. Early on, team leaders should work to motivate and engage the members of the team. This, says Cruickshank, means going office to office talking up the deal to team members and advising them of their likely involvement. Try to avoid simply sending an e-mail out to the

team, advises Cruickshank; the personal touch is much more effective.

Once the team is in place, hold an initial meeting. This is the time to define clearly the project objectives and present a time line of the project to the team. Describe various internal leadership roles, the client's preferences and what the communication protocol will be among team members. However, the most important point to get across to members is that it is always all right to ask any questions. You make this known, says Cruickshank, by frequently stating throughout the initial meeting, "Any questions?"

Once the team begins its work, remember to have regular meetings. Set the schedule of regular meetings in advance. This way the team knows that every Tuesday at 10 o'clock, for example, the team will get together. Set an agenda for the meeting as well. By doing these simple things, suggests Cruickshank, the meetings as well as the team will be more efficient.

The Team Leader

Effective team leadership can be broken down into a few simple steps, says Cruickshank. First, define clearly the project's objective as well as the goals of the client, and make sure to pass these along to the team. This is also the time to identify any risks. Bring any concerns to the partner overseeing the project right away so the partner can brief the client. It is important to manage the client's expectation as early in the process as possible, notes Cruickshank. It is never too early to put together a contingency plan just in case things don't go the way you imagine at the beginning.

Next, think through the structure of the project. This means, says Cruickshank, putting together charts, lists and schedules, and having them somewhere easily accessible to everyone on the team. Dates and events can change very quickly, reminds Cruickshank. Hang a big wall calendar which lists all deadlines and important dates and encourage team members to check it periodically. If the technology is available, try setting up an electronic chart; it will allow you to quickly track changes and is easily distributed to the team.

As the team leader you are responsible for reviewing the plan periodically, making sure deadlines are being met and making any necessary adjustments. Insist team members give you early warnings of any potential problems that may affect the deadlines. Don't forget, reminds Cruickshank, to alert team members when you learn from the client or partner that there is a change in plans. The last thing you want is to have a junior associate spend two days drafting a memo that had become obsolete.

Project leaders must learn to delegate the work skillfully among team members, says Cruickshank. This means taking the time to think through the tasks and responsibilities thoroughly. Make sure one member of the team isn't working 70 hours a week on the project while another is working just 10 hours. There should be balanced participation of members according to their skill level and experience.

A good team leader, says Cruickshank, establishes and articulates protocols for the team and sets ground rules for what is acceptable and unacceptable. For example, notes Cruickshank, make sure the team is aware of the protocol for contacting the client or partner with a matter, what the expense rules are, and through whom to filter new developments.

Finally, at the conclusion of the project, the team leader should evaluate and learn from the experience. Providing the members of the team with feedback is essential, says Cruickshank, as it benefits both you and them. Praise and encourage members where appropriate but also give criticism and advice for improvement when necessary. Critical feedback, notes Cruickshank, lets team members know what went wrong and how to avoid the same mistakes in the future and is valuable guidance for junior associates. Remember to keep a file and archive task lists and draft forms you used during the project. You don't want to reinvent the wheel for each project, warns Cruickshank.