

MAPing Out Your Future: One Firm's Moving Ahead Program

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After getting berated by the judge in a motions courtroom filled with attorneys and questioning his decision to pursue a litigation career, the first year associate in Saul Ewing's Litigation department immediately sought out his mentor, a Partner and chairman of the department. To the young lawyer's relief, his mentor listened, discussed the experience, and gave him advice on how to make his next appearance more successful. More importantly, the mentor gave him the confidence to continue to pursue his dream of litigating big cases.

PROVIDING CAREER GUIDANCE

Recognizing that the future strength of any law firm lies in retaining talented lawyers, Saul Ewing has implemented a unique associate development program called the "Moving Ahead Program" or MAP. MAP is a multi-year plan that addresses common struggles associates encounter as they grow their careers and rise through the ranks at a law firm.

The program has three key components: Orientation; Career Development and Mentoring. Orientation begins on day one of an associate's life at the firm. Associates are welcomed with a practical "Survival Guide" for the months and years ahead. The multi-year career development program, which is organized by "Milestones" that divide all associates into classes based on their years of practice, focuses on building legal and professional development skills and laying the foundation for Partnership. The career development program includes training that culminates with a "Business of the Firm" program at year six, which provides senior associates with a realistic view of the firm's finances and revenue model to prepare them for Partnership. Finally, MAP includes a mentoring program in which associates are paired with a Partner mentor and an associate mentor, both of whom guide the associates through their work, offering an open-door policy and a shoulder on which to lean.

ORIENTATION

It is the first day of your new job at law firm. For many new lawyers, it is their first "real" office job, particularly if they went to law school right out of college. For those who worked full-time between educational pursuits, the law firm job will not be completely new, but it will most likely be different than previous work experiences.

New associates at this Philadelphia firm launch their legal careers with breakfast with the Managing Partner and the Executive Partner of the Firm, as well as members of the Career Development Committee. (No pressure, really!) One of the highlights on day one is when the firm's Philadelphia Managing Partner and firm historian talks about the firm's history.

"What I try to instill in our new people is that they are part of a tradition that dates back to the mid-19th century," he says. "They are joining a law firm that has been home to giants in the legal profession, people who were not only great lawyers but played prominent leadership roles in professional, civic and community organizations."

Over the next two days, associates learn about the people in the firm and how the firm is structured. Orientation includes an explanation about how evaluations work and how the firm – and each individual associate - can measure success in his/her career. Also discussed are the benefits provided to associates and how ethics now becomes a matter of each person's life, as well as information about the firm's pro-bono and diversity initiatives and mentoring program. Finally, new associates receive training on the various technology systems.

SKILL BUILDING

Second- and third-year associates follow a skills building portion of MAP, while fourth and fifth years receive guidance on professional development. Sixth-year associates and older associates are considered Partners in training. Milestones, which are a series of goals and expectations, have been developed so each associate has a tangible list of career development expectations to benchmark his or her annual progress.

The goals and expectations are divided into the following categories:

- Quality and quantity;
- Marketing and sales; and
- Leadership and management

Encompassed in this program are targeted training programs for associates at each stage of their career. Substantive and practical skills training is provided through a combination of firmwide training sessions and departmental seminars, ultimately supported by firm-paid outside CLE course work. The training seminars include writing programs, negotiation seminars, business of the firm seminars, marketing seminars, and one-on-one marketing programs.

The success of MAP is tied intricately to each associate's success. The Partners evaluate associates annually. All Partners have the right -- but not the obligation – to evaluate associates, unless they have worked directly with an associate. The evaluation process is coordinated with the same Milestones used to guide each stage of an associate's development at the firm.

MENTORING

Mentoring is one of the most important investments in an associate's career. Each associate is hired with the expectation that he or she will eventually become a Partner at the firm. While it is widely accepted that the best form of mentoring is the "old" model of apprenticeship - meaning Partners are responsible for guiding and training associates through their careers - the Firm also has a formal mentoring program. From day one, each associate is paired with a Partner mentor and an associate mentor. Mentoring is not something that can be forced; however one unexpected result of the formal mentoring program is that it has encouraged an atmosphere of informal mentoring. Partner mentors are charged with supporting and championing their associates' careers by guiding associates in business development and on the Partnership track; introducing associates to members of the firm; and acting as an early warning system to prevent an associate from "getting-off-track." Associate mentors act as writing advisors and facilitate a new associate's orientation and introduction to the firm, playing the role akin to a big brother/big sister. Saul Ewing's mentoring program has contributed to a culture of collegiality and support across generations.

ESTABLISHING THE PROGRAM

The firm's MAP initiative grew out of a collective desire to give associates a more structured career guidance and mentor program. In the late 1990s, firm Partners formed a committee of Partners and associates. The committee surveyed and listened to associates, and created a list of recommendations designed to help associates succeed.

The first step in creating MAP was finding out what the Partners' goals and expectations were for associates at each level. The next step was surveying associates to come up with the benchmarking Milestones, which were enthusiastically adopted by the Firm's Executive Committee. With the Milestones in place, the firm developed the programs needed to support MAP, starting with orientation and culminating with the "Business of the Firm" program. Along the way, associates are supported through the ongoing mentoring program. Finally, the firm implemented the career development portion of MAP, which involved the Milestones and the evaluation process, so evaluators of associates were using the same criteria. A staged implementation of the MAP model allowed for engagement by Partners and associates.

The firm continues to refine this model, and finds it both flexible and useful. Mentors use the Milestones to start conversations with their associates; associates use them to seek assignments from their department chairs; and evaluators use them as an appropriate checklist of an associate's development.

Supporting associates is tantamount to supporting the future of any law firm. It starts with a commitment to the associates becoming fellow Partners, which must come from management of the firm as well as all other Partners. In the same way that ethics need to come from the top and be a part of a business's corporate culture, firm leadership must also embrace associate development. After receiving vocal support from law firm leadership, the next stage is creating and implementing a program that works best in the firm's culture. Finally, the program must be constantly monitored, reviewed and revised to keep up with the changing legal market.