

Leading questions

Are good managing partners born or created? **Dominique Graham** takes a look at DLA Piper's initiative to train up its managers with bespoke 'leadership' training

THE NEWS that DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary has agreed a bespoke 'leadership' training programme with the world-famous Harvard Business School is groundbreaking for the legal sector and reignites the debate over whether first-rate managing partners are born or can be made.

The truth is, of course, that the best legal leaders are the result of a mix of both nature and nurture.

The DLA Piper venture will see it receive its own firm-specific management course at Harvard's business school from this autumn. At least 50 partners from across DLA Piper's network of international offices are lined up to attend the course each year, with the first intake set to include managing partner Nigel Knowles – a sure sign of leadership from the top.

The course has been run for many companies, but this formalised training is new to UK law firms. It is also anathema to the usual anti-corporate stance adopted by such partnerships.

So, is this move into formal partner training a sign that law firms are taking management seriously? Is this finally the recognition that partners with aspirations to management require proper training in order to do a proper job?

It is certainly true that, as law firms have grown, the role of a managing partner has become more varied and the pressures tougher. Globalisation demands far better integration between offices and departments and, as a result, managing partners need a global vista to operate effectively. Increasingly, London managing partners are European coordinators; those at the helms of such multimillion-pound businesses might be forgiven for feeling sweaty-palmed at the prospect.

The Harvard scheme will equip nervous law firm managers with many of the necessary tools to run a successful firm. Speak to the City's greatest legal minds and most welcome the idea of some bespoke advice on what they need to know. But the enthusiasm is tempered by a note of caution. "You need to choose your business school carefully," says one former managing partner. "Some courses are too focused on the financial side of management."

Management skills are not just about analysing spreadsheets. As with any business, running a law firm is about people skills first and foremost. Which means getting the best out of a highly talented workforce. That is the biggest challenge for any law firm leader, and some business schools with regular intakes of relatively aggressive, egocentric investment banker types forget that. They churn out masters of the uni-



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verse complete with the assumption that people are fungible and replaceable; and in reality, that is just not the case with lawyers.

Good people management impacts on the bottom line in all sorts of ways, not least cross-selling: increased instructions from existing clients will happen only if there is an element of trust between partners.

Clearly, law firms are now taking the role of management more seriously than ever and this is to be applauded. It is in part driven by the sheer size of these firms – a managing partner is now just one crucial cog in a sophisticated ruling machine – but also by a shift in mentality, where firms are viewed as businesses and not just collegiate partnerships. Those that get it right manage to combine profitability and collegiality.

Increasingly, UK managing partners are full time workers, particularly in larger firms. US firms, in particular in New York, have usually had one full-time manager or chairman, but their office and practice area heads often sustain a significant transactional workload. Some fast-growing offices require a dedicated partner to set up and

lead for the time it takes to do the job; such is the case at US firm King & Spalding, where litigation partner George Branch was seconded to London from Atlanta to do just that. "I'll leave London when the job's done," he says. Interestingly, part of his job occurred before the firm was actually on the ground in London. This included research, contacting clients and discussions with others in the London market. What is more, if the firm is growing not just in London but in Europe generally, then a European leadership post may also be full time.

It is certainly true that while DLA Piper may be the first to adopt such a far-reaching training scheme, some US firms have been sending their senior partners and chairmen on legal management and marketing courses for years. They do not like to be named, suffice it to say that those that do such things tend to be the top US firms which are very well run – think Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton and Latham & Watkins, for example.

Of course, formal management training will never be mandatory and success will always be possible without it. But perhaps the key is for managing partners to dedicate themselves entirely to the management role and quit the pressures of juggling a transactional workload as well. This is not only practical (it is not easy doing a deal while jetting around the globe 'integrating' new offices), but is also increasingly necessary if you are to deliver serious growth. You run up against the fear of life after management, but it can be done. One US partner spent five years in full-time management only to return to a busy arbitration practice with little problem picking up where he left off.

The moral of the story? There are enough managing partners out there who have been doing it for years, have been re-elected by their partners and are not only doing well, but are perceived to be doing well too. Most learn on the job, take the management role entirely in their stride, focus on the bigger picture and ensure that their clarity of vision is communicated succinctly to others.

This begs the question of whether formalised management training is either necessary or necessarily successful. DLA Piper should be saluted for taking the initiative, but the fact remains: some partners are just cut out to lead, while others should stick to the billing. The idea that the best lawyer must also be the best manager and the best administrator does not necessarily follow; it remains to be seen whether some of DLA Piper's dollars could have been put to better use. ■ **Dominique Graham** is a director at legal recruitment consultancy **Graham Gill**



Nigel Knowles: one of the first DLA Piper partners to be sent to Harvard Business School