

An aerial, black and white photograph of a rowing team in a scull. The team consists of five rowers and a coxswain, all positioned in a long, narrow boat. They are moving across a body of water with visible ripples and small waves. The rowers are using oars, which are visible extending into the water. The perspective is from directly above, looking down the length of the boat.

Leadership development for Partners: what they value

by Morley AS Potter MBA
Scott-McGregor
August 2019

The logo for Scott-McGregor, featuring a stylized blue arc above the company name.**Scott-McGregor**
Strategy into Action

As the leadership group in a professional services firm, Partners are seen as role models; they represent the way the firm wants to be seen externally and led internally. Leadership development is intended to accelerate, consolidate and strengthen the capability of this critically important group; it is a major investment for the individual and their firm.

This article summarises the comments and evaluations of over 100 attendees of a consistently highly-rated global leadership programme run over a 7 year period. It paints a picture of what people find relevant and what they takeaway from such events, and offers a template as well as some general pointers both for style as well as content.

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In 2012 and in the absence of more formal support within this global advisory network, we were asked to put together a programme to help existing Partners develop their leadership strengths for an increasingly uncertain future.

Over the ensuing 7 years we tracked the reactions of over 100 leaders drawn from offices across the globe; here are the results of that survey.

They paint an interesting picture of what people found RELEVANT and

what were their TAKEAWAYS.

They suggest guidelines worth considering when designing support programmes for senior leadership in professional services. They also reinforce some more general pointers that are summarised in the Conclusion.

[The figures in graphs are based on the number of times people referred to the topic.

(It was reassuring to find that text-mining software gave the collection of reactions an overall 'positive' sentiment rating!)]

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BACKGROUND

The programmes were designed to address what we and our co-developers believed were the critical issues facing partners.

So if Partners in professional services firms are going to take time out to attend a programme, what makes that time relevant?

built-in to allow for this.

Self awareness. It is clearly important for leaders to take time away from the ‘hamster wheel’. Around half the comments in this category pointed towards the value of honest discussions with colleagues about personal style and approach. This was helped by the judicious use of psychometrics. In addition, 25% of comments referenced the focus on personal resilience, an area that has received increased prominence over recent years.

Business Development. In almost equal measure to Self Awareness, the demand to build more business and ‘increase the size of the pie’ weighs heavily. For this reason, enough focus on Business Development was important.

Coaching and mentoring. Leaders’ abilities to actively develop the capability and motivation of their teams, and to address personnel challenges, are essential. The programmes focused on coaching and mentoring strategies as ways to help get the best from others. Admittedly on several occasions we witnessed a lack of clarity over the difference between coaching and mentoring; it is an area that warrants more concentrated investment.

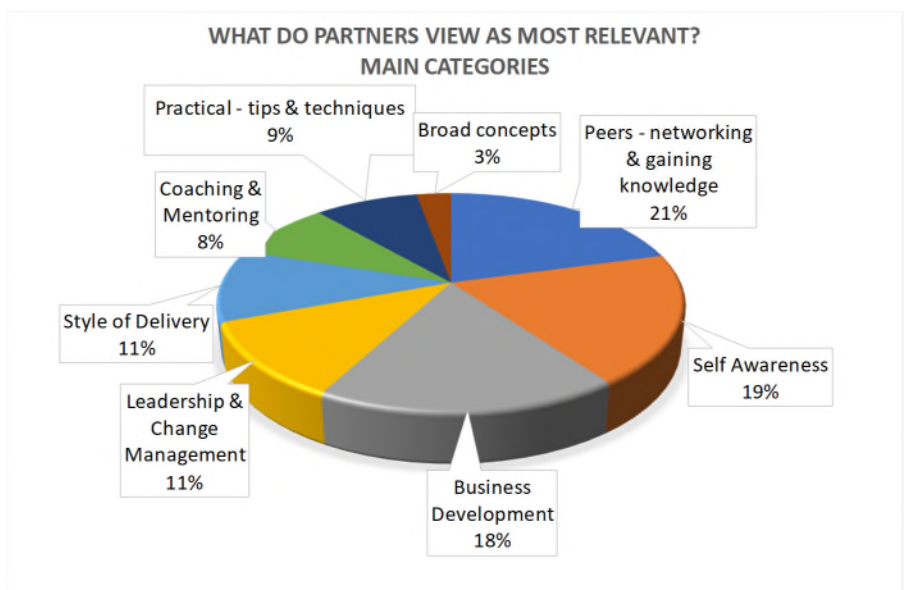


They focused on the non-technical aspects of leadership. As a professional’s career progresses, non-technical challenges occupy an increasing proportion of work time. Partners – as senior leaders – must balance keeping abreast of technical developments while also handling major accounts and a portfolio of client projects, bringing in more business, determining strategic direction and attending to the demands of internal firm management. The drive to achieve good returns for time invested – ie increasing revenue and profitability – means newly appointed leaders often find themselves under-prepared across this broader spectrum of responsibilities.

In the programme we made time to consider strategic and commercial challenges. We also focused attention on identifying and dealing with leadership demands and looked in depth at two areas – business development (sales) and strategies for getting the best from people.

RELEVANCE

Networking. It is a healthy if sobering reality – for anyone charged with commissioning, designing and facilitating such programmes – that participants often place most value on the chance to network and compare notes with peers. Across an inevitably busy programme, enough time needs to be



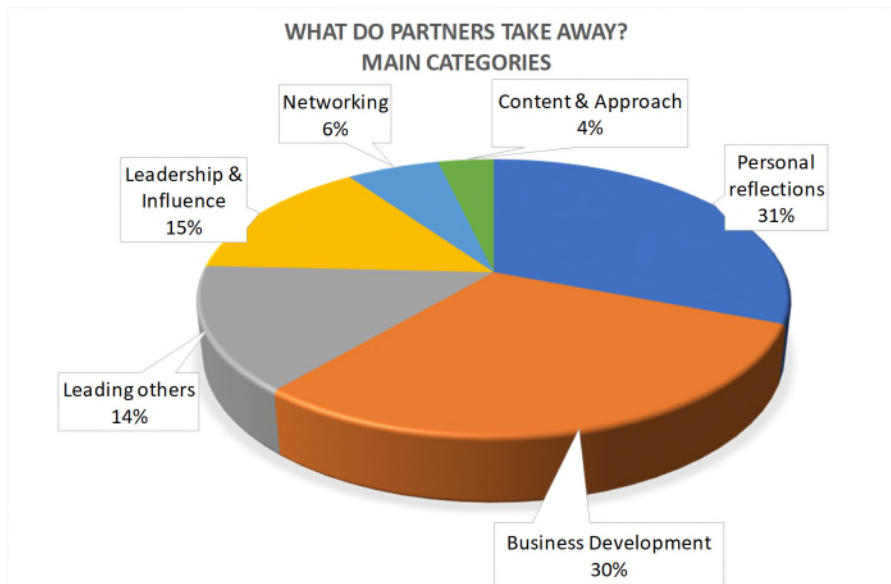
Style of delivery. As ever, it is not just what is done but the way it is done.

Leaders are sensitive to the way programmes are run. In this case, data suggest that respondents valued the case study approach and the role of study groups in offering opportunities to explore and discuss the reality of working situations.

Practical tips and techniques were favoured over exploring broader concepts.

If this summarises what the leaders saw as relevant, what did they take away?

TAKE AWAYS



Personal reflections. By a whisker, personal reflections topped the takeaways.

It can be lonely at the top, and high achieving leadership in many cases receive far less direct feedback than they would like. 55% of comments referenced personal learning as a significant takeaway. Of these, half placed value on receiving honest feedback from peers. The other half found an appropriate psychometric a useful framework on which to hang thoughts about their own leadership approach.

Business Development. Takeaways about Business Development ran a close second. It is worth breaking

down the 30% figure.

Just over a third of comments suggested that it had been helpful to stand back and revisit how the sales process works and how to influence it.

Another third was more specific. They liked having techniques for meetings, for building relationships and for handling the 'sharp end' ie best practice in structuring actual interactions with potential as well as existing clients.

A significant proportion commented on the impact of several inspirational case studies. Having time to consider

Leading others. When it came to leading others, two thirds of comments referred to the value of practical techniques for coaching and mentoring others.

Leadership and influence (see graph below). The dominant interest here lay in how best to **lead the firm** ie strategic leadership as well as operational. Two sub-categories stand out: three-quarters referred to actions that help bring about change (75% sub-category comments) and the need to uphold – and pass on – their firm's partnership values (25%).

Of the remaining reactions (see graph), specific comments were made about getting to grips with the difference between Managers versus Leaders and the producer-leader dilemma

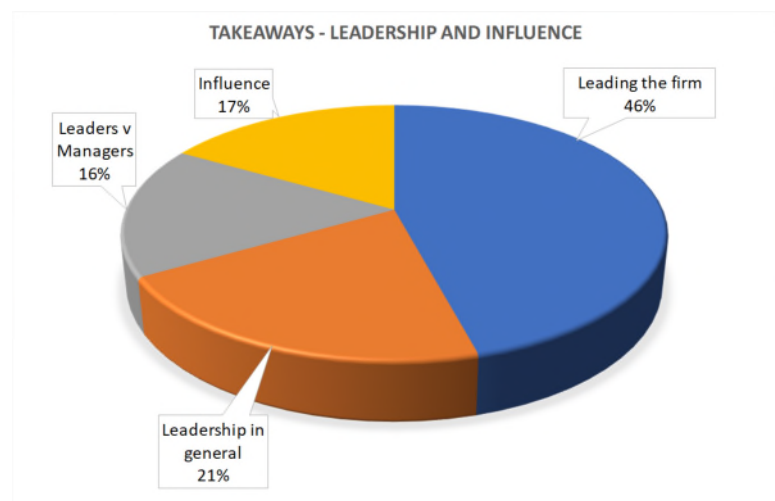
Finally, in the complex matrix that is the professional firm or 'smart' organisation, the ability to Influence without direct or formal authority is the name of the game. Strategies, principles and little things – 'nudges' – that can be deployed to bring about change all received specific comment.

IN CONCLUSION

These programmes addressed leadership in a specific context, the role of Partners in professional services, and the content reflected this.

However, there are some general points that have wider application when de-

and talk through what someone did to turn around an apparently dire situation clearly struck home.



signing and running support events for senior leadership:

- **Make time for networking.** Day-to-day schedules for top leadership are demanding; there is rarely enough time to get together let alone interact and pursue areas of mutual interest. Yet when they arise, these opportunities tend to be welcomed and well received. They help strengthen bonds. Innovation, agility and fresh momentum are strongly linked to the quality of relationships in a network
- **Adopt a reality or case study approach.** With time a scarce commodity, leaders want to find solutions to the reality they experience everyday; there is understandably little patience for theory or skills education (even

though in many cases this is just what is needed!).

Discussing a case study, scenario or current reality in a working group permits the testing of ideas and thinking. Relevance is more immediate and solutions emerges naturally. If skills education and fresh ideas are needed, they can be introduced in context, a far more acceptable approach for high achieving leaders .

- **Be an ‘architect’.** The well designed (open) question asked at the right moment – and well selected case or situation posed at the right time – allow discussion at a level that reflects the interests of those involved. It keeps control where it needs to be – with the leaders them-

selves – and outcomes do not depend on the perceived wisdom of a third-party facilitator or consultant. It is most likely to work best for the collective interests, experiences and motivation of the people concerned.

- **Make sure there is ‘something in it for me’.** It is clear from the data that a large part of the value of the programmes described comes from receiving and reflecting on positive critical insight from peers and colleagues.

This last point is powerful and can kick-start change and reassessment. It can be pivotal. It is also a two-edged sword and must be carefully designed-in and managed; as ever, timing and context are everything.

Morley Potter is an experienced consultant with a career-long interest in organisation development and finding innovative solutions to the challenges of personal and institutional growth. He specialises in the work of professional and ‘smart’ organisations.

You will find his website at: <https://scott-mcgregor.com>