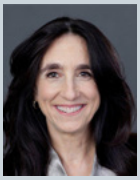
# Investing In Your High Potentials: Coaching Circles

*Retaining budding mid-level and senior associates has again become a strategy for law firms, but the market is tight due to the lower hiring rates following the 2008–09 economic recession. Recruiters and even firm clients are plucking associates with experience and expertise. Further, a 2015 American Lawyer mid-level associate survey indicates a strong attrition rate within this group when their expectations are not being met. Millennials value transparency in expectations and effective hands-on mentoring. Firms can gain an edge by investing in building these skills within partner ranks, in order to retain their investment and retention of these high performing associates.*



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Retention of high potential associates has become a strategic business choice for law firms. The market for talent has gotten more robust and associates are getting calls from search professionals and clients about other opportunities. The 2015 *American Lawyer* mid-level associate survey indicates a large pent up attrition among mid-level associates at law firms. The market for mid-level and senior associates with experience and expertise is tight because of the low hiring firms after the 2008–09 economic recession. Millennials (born 1980–2000) are a driven generation who value transparent expectations and effective hands-on mentoring. For all of these reasons, law firms need to make a strategic investment in that group in order to retain their high potential associates.

## Benefits of Coaching

For any organization, there are a large number of benefits to providing coaching. There are two benefits, however, which specifically address generational disconnects that are rampant in the law firm workplace and have a direct causation impact on retention. First, the "rules" in law firms are not transparent and they are in a constant state of flux. Millennials are a generation who are used to concrete transparency. For example, when they were given an assignment in school, even college and law school, they received a rubric which contained a description of how every point could be obtained or lost. The lack of transparency of expectations in law firms is both confusing and frustrating to this generation. Second, Millennials have helicopter or snow plow parents who take an active role in their children's path and progress. This generation enters the legal workplace not only looking for mentoring, but feeling that they are entitled to an active participant in their success. Coaching circles allow for each of these generational disconnects to be addressed in a manner that Millennials find satisfying and empowering.

## Why Don't Partners Sponsor, Mentor, or Coach?

Most partners in law firms are not active or effective sponsors, mentors or coaches. Why? First, billable hour demands have increased on partners. Second, non-billable hour demands have increased on partners. Third, the firm does not pay them for mentoring, only for bringing in business and billing hours. Fourth, associate attrition is high and they feel that they are investing in someone who will leave anyway. Fifth, mentoring, sponsoring, and/or coaching across differences in gender, ethnicity/race, and sexual orientation is risky for partner who do not “look” like the “best and the brightest” coming out of law schools these days. Lastly, there are generational disconnects at play which result in material frustration when mentoring across generation.

Mentoring and its corollary versions, sponsorship and coaching, have a positive impact on retention, development and promotion in a talent-based business. Yet law firms cannot rely on their partners to invest appropriately and strategically in the associates they should seek to retain. As a result, looking outside to fill the gap becomes necessary.

## Essential Elements of Circles

Coaching circles have a number of essential elements:

1. The coach should be external to the firm, and focused on delivering individualized coaching to each participant. Many of the high-potential participants will have colleagues who they consider to be mentors at the firm. It is essential for them to also have someone they don’t work with, but who is familiar with how the firm works and the relevant criteria for success for each participant.
2. The circle should be small, ideally between four and six participants. It is essential that trust relationships are created between the coach and each participant, for the group to leverage the results that each individual could achieve on his/her own. Given the size and geographic breadth of most law firms, associates do not know each other so an added benefit for both the participants and firms, is the creation of trust relationships. Both will benefit from the social capital created in terms of future leadership collaboration, business generation, and cross-selling to existing clients.
3. The coach should have a conversation with each of the attorneys “responsible” for each participant. Every firm has a different system and the “responsible” attorneys may be, for example, the practice group leader, mentor, partner for whom the participant works, or a partner who will participate in the firm’s evaluation or promotion committee. The purpose of the meeting is for the coach to hear from someone in a supervisory role, where the participant is doing well and what the participant needs to either do differently or additionally to remain a “superstar” and “on track” for partnership. The conversations with the coach should be direct and honest, even if such a conversation has not yet been had with the participant.
4. The circle should meet monthly as a group. Participants need to prioritize attendance at the meetings. The agenda for the meetings should be set initially based upon the feedback received from the “responsible” attorneys. Agendas for the subsequent meetings should be set by the circle with strong input from the coach.
5. Each participant should also meet individually with the coach each month. The agenda for these meeting may be the one established by the conversation with the “responsible” attorneys or it may be established by the participant. As with any coaching session, the participant should expect to leave with action items and to be held accountable for the completion of these action items. It may be necessary for the participant to seek guidance from the circle and solicit their assistance with implementation of these action items.
6. The confidentiality of what is said in both the individual coaching sessions and the circle should be owned by the participants.
7. The circle is a “push,” not a “pull” opportunity. The firm will provide the resources of the circle as a “push” toward continued success at the firm. Any participant who needs to be cajoled and policed into taking advantage of the opportunity is a waste of a space in a circle. Self-motivation, business savvy, and the maturity to understand the value of this self-investment is necessary for participants to be successful.
8. There should be a mechanism to hold the circle accountable. This may take a number of forms, for example, a quarterly report to someone in an oversight or management role at the firm that, without breaching the confidentiality of the circle, discloses participation, engagement and satisfaction levels. Participants should also develop a communication plan about the circle for the “responsible” attorney(s) who invested in him/her, as part an action item during individual coaching sessions.

## Return on Investment

The return on investment from coaching circles is two-fold. First, the firm strategically invests in high potential associates at a point in their career that is pivotal for both them and the firm. No matter how intelligent and hardworking these associates are, they cannot succeed in law firms without someone, in addition to themselves, investing in their development. What makes a “superstar” mid-level associate is not what it takes to make partner. There is no transparent roadmap they can implement on their own. If a firm's culture doesn't result in naturally forming relationships that include the elements of effective sponsorship, the firm needs to acknowledge that deficit and rectify it. Doing so allows these high potentials to be retained, developed and promoted as they understand and meet all of the requisite criteria.

Secondly, even if a high potential associate chooses to seek opportunities elsewhere, they leave feeling invested in and loyal to the law firm. Since the 2008–09 economic crisis, this type of investment has been one of the best tools to generate new business as the associates who leave become clients of the firm.