Associate Evaluations…the Next Generation
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Ecstatic, exhausted, relieved…a perfect description of the current emotional state of many professional
development (PD) professionals at the close of associate evaluation season. Before the 2012 season
becomes a distant memory, take some time to reflect and improve your process. Participants in the
evaluation process offer no end of feedback in the form of complaints. While you may make slight
adjustments based on partner and management feedback each year, have you ever considered
whether the current process is well-suited to the newest generation of lawyers?

This new generation of associates, the “millennial” generation, is often stereotyped as demanding,
sheltered, technology-obsessed, and unwilling to pay their dues. Stereotypes aside, studies have
shown that this generation has a different set of workplace motivational factors. To employers who
meet their need for job engagement, professional development and career planning, millennials offer a
strong work ethic and personal loyalty (Edwards, 2010; Howe 2011). While some employers revere the
millennials’ technology proficiencies and strong teamwork skills, others feel they are “far too
demanding when it comes to needing guidance, frequent performance appraisals, rapid career
advancement and work-life balance” (Alsop, 2008, p. 7). Millennials are increasing in the associate
ranks; and several firms have been struggling to change to meet the developmental expectations of
their associates (Rikleen, 2008).

How can PD professionals enhance the associate evaluation process to better suit the newest
generation of lawyers? Infuse the process with greater transparency. Increasing the transparency
surrounding the evaluation form, the quality of partner feedback, and the review meeting gives
associates the meaningful and relevant feedback they can, and will, use to improve their performance.
While these elements of the process are often the focus of annual revisions, frequently the concerns of
partner and management drown out the unique developmental needs of Millennial associates.

Evaluation Form
The futile quest for the perfect evaluation form is perpetual, driven by complaints from everyone who
comes into contact with it. Feedback providers declare the forms are too long, too complex, or just
plain confusing. Associates fail to connect with the form’s format and/or content. If the form does not
clearly define performance criteria, or the criteria do not reflect how the firm actually assesses
associate performance and success, it is inadequate. For instance, in a firm with a competency-based
development system, the evaluation form should accurately incorporate the competencies, specific to
associate level if applicable, and reflect the language of the competencies. Even if your firm or
organization does not use competencies, the evaluation criteria should be as explicit as possible, so
that the form is easily understood by, and meaningful to, the feedback providers and associates.
Length is an issue, so look for sections that can be condensed or grouped to reduce duplicative feedback. The end goal is an evaluation form that reflects the organization’s true measures of performance. Millennials will strive to meet and exceed clearly defined performance measures, so firms must develop an evaluation form that reflects such measures to create a framework that meets those needs (Howe, 2011).

Quality of Feedback
While the millennial generation is motivated by a range of factors that are substantially different from prior generations, research points to the role high-quality feedback plays in driving millennials’ workplace success. Millennials, having been measured and assessed their entire lives, are skilled at incorporating relevant feedback into their personal career development plans. Tinkering with the evaluation form so that it reflects the correct criteria is only the opening gambit in the PD administrator’s quest to enhance the quality of associate performance feedback. The real challenge is ensuring that associates receive the kind of developmental feedback they can understand and use.

Are your evaluation comments attributed to specific partners or other senior attorneys? If not, do you know why? One strategy to ensure meaningful feedback from senior lawyers is to make the feedback collection process transparent by fostering increased accountability between feedback providers and the associates. You could start by allowing the associates to nominate their feedback providers while also permitting all senior lawyers to comment on the performance of any associate with whom they have worked, whether in a billable, pro bono, firm leadership, or other capacity. This helps create a full and multifaceted picture of the associate’s performance, but unfortunately still runs the risk that evaluations will consist of anonymous platitudes or vague criticisms.

A surefire way to increase the quality of developmental feedback is to identify the author of all comments on the evaluation form. Due to subtle social pressure, senior lawyers are far more likely to provide specific and meaningful comments if they know their contributions are clearly identified. Concerns that contributors will become less likely to provide constructive feedback because of attribution are legitimate, but can be addressed through effective training on how to provide feedback, generally or as part of the evaluation process and providing appropriate guidance. Partners and senior attorneys need detailed guidance for providing meaningful developmental feedback. Regardless of whether your firm uses competencies, feedback providers need to understand the evaluation criteria and how to best craft their comments so that they are not only thoughtful, but precise.

Making the case for feedback attribution can require a cultural shift, requiring the buy-in of leaders of the organization. Building safeguards into the evaluation process that prevent unmediated attribution can alleviate some concerns. Having PD professionals, associate mentors, practice group heads or others involved in the evaluation process review all comments affords the opportunity to intercede early in the review process if potential problems emerge. It is also important to highlight process improvements, such as limiting the time spent agonizing over the drafting of long feedback summaries. Ultimately the benefit inures to the associate who receives feedback that is specific and contextual.
The more connected evaluation comments are to individual partners and senior attorneys, the more they will be appreciated and incorporated by associates.

**Review meeting**

The performance review meeting is perhaps the part of the evaluation process that is most important to the associates so it should be well planned and thoughtfully executed. How the meeting is held can undercut rather than underscore developmental feedback. Naturally, the attorney delivering the review must be well-prepared, but too many organizations fail to provide the associate with an adequate opportunity to prepare. This procedural lack of transparency impairs the credibility of the process. Because these meetings are fraught with stressors, providing the associate with a copy of the evaluation or access to the evaluation comments a few days in advance of the meeting allows the associate to digest it in a safe environment and begin crafting appropriate questions. For associates to be able to effectively process the developmental feedback, the meeting needs to be interactive. Performance review meetings signal the end of the review process but the beginning of a new cycle. So, a post-meeting follow-up, whether with a mentor, coach or PD professional to guide associates in creating a developmental plan for the coming year harnesses millennial lawyers’ motivation for self-improvement.

Millennials embrace the overall performance evaluation process if they can see the value, key takeaways, and expectations. They require a clear picture of how all factors in the performance evaluation process help drive constructive feedback (Espinoza et al., 2010).

As PD professionals, we can expand the developmental opportunities inherent in the associate evaluation process by making our firm’s process more open and accessible to associates. At the close of the evaluation season, associates should be ecstatic, relieved, energized, AND motivated to deliver better performance and productivity.

**References**


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