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Elevating Partner Leadership: How a Global Law Firm Transformed Associate Development Through Partner Upward Reviews

A case study on how SRA's partner-upward reviews empowered a global law firm to transform leadership behavior and accelerate associate development.

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The Turning Point

“I love the work, but I’m not sure where I fit into the long-term plan,” one associate confided during an exit interview. Comments like this echoed across offices: associates respected their partners’ technical acumen but lacked direction, feedback and a sense of inclusion. With only 68 % of associates staying on, leadership knew it couldn’t ignore these stories.

Why Traditional Reviews Weren’t Enough

Standard partner evaluations focused on client satisfaction and business generation. They offered little insight into how partners led their teams. To close that gap, SRA introduced **upward reviews**—confidential surveys where associates evaluate partners on inclusiveness, professional development, communication and work management.

As one equity partner later admitted, “I thought I was doing fine until I saw my team’s feedback on delegation. It was a wake-up call.”

Designing the SRA Upward Review

Scope:

- 445 partners evaluated by 1 347 associates across practice areas and offices
- 79 % associate response rate; 94 % partners receiving reports.

Survey Design:

- 30 questions on a 5-point scale, benchmarked against SRA’s legal industry database
- Customized items aligned with the firm’s competencies
- Strict anonymity encouraged honest feedback

Key Dimensions Defined:

- **Inclusive Leadership** – making everyone feel welcome, inviting diverse perspectives
- **Professional Development** – mentoring, providing feedback, clarifying career paths
- **Communication** – setting expectations, being approachable, giving timely feedback
- **Matter Management** – assigning work fairly, delegating effectively, overseeing projects

By defining these terms in plain language, associates could easily rate what mattered most to them.

What We Learned

The upward reviews painted a nuanced picture:

- **Inclusive Leadership (average 4.2/5)** – Most partners created respectful environments, but a handful needed help fostering diverse viewpoints.

“My partner listens to my ideas in meetings and makes sure everyone speaks up,” one associate noted.

- **Professional Development (average 3.6/5)** – The biggest gap. Only 34 % of associates said their partners regularly discussed their performance or career goals.

“I wasn’t sure if I was on the right track until these reviews prompted my partner to schedule a development chat,” shared a fifth-year associate.

- **Communication (average 4.1/5)** – While most partners were approachable, only 41 % of associates felt expectations were clearly communicated.
- **Matter Management (average 3.7/5)** – Work was often assigned based on availability, not strengths or growth opportunities. Only 29 % of associates said work was distributed fairly.

Analysis showed variations by practice area and seniority. Corporate partners excelled in inclusion but lagged in development conversations; litigation partners delegated well but struggled with timely feedback. Younger partners who had recently made partner ranked higher in communication and coaching than long-tenured equity partners.

Turning Insight into Action

Rather than send everyone to the same leadership seminar, SRA recommended a tiered coaching approach:

Tier 1: Intensive Development (23 % of partners)

Partners scoring below 3.5 across dimensions are recommended to go through coaching on work allocation, delegation, expectation setting and mentoring fundamentals. Quarterly workshops built skills gradually.

Tier 2: Targeted Skill Building (41 % of partners)

For partners with one or two areas to improve are suggested with three-month programs on feedback techniques, fair work distribution and tough conversations.

Tier 3: Leadership Excellence (36 % of partners)

High-scoring partners can be great mentors and culture champions. They can be coached on firm-wide leadership and business development. These partners can model best practices and help colleagues grow.

Implementation Suggestions

The program for over twelve months:

1. **Foundation Building (months 1–3):** Partners received individual feedback reports. All partners should attend matter management training and begin using a structured associate development plan.
2. **Skill Development (months 4–9):** Coaching sessions should be launched for each tier. Organize a peer-mentoring network program with experienced partners seeking improvement.
3. **Culture Integration (months 10–12):** A follow-up with a survey with associates about changes they'd seen. Recognize the leaders with improved leadership competencies.

Business Impact

The changes went beyond improved survey scores:

- **Retention climbed from 68 % to 88 %**, reducing recruiting costs and preserving institutional knowledge.
- **30 % increase in leadership scores** signaled real behavioral change.
- **50 % more associates reported regular career-development conversations**, boosting morale and engagement.
- Partners who invested in coaching saw measurable improvements in client satisfaction and team productivity.

As one senior associate reflected, “Seeing my partner ask for feedback and act on it showed me the firm is serious about developing its leaders—and us.”

Why SRA Stands Out

This case shows how a tailored upward review can reveal blind spots and drive targeted development. SRA's deep understanding of law-firm dynamics, commitment to confidentiality and focus on turning data into action helped this firm convert leadership weaknesses into a competitive edge, enabling associate development and retention.

This case study represents a composite of SRA's work with multiple law firms. Identifying details have been modified to protect client confidentiality.

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