

Legal STAR

by Terri Feeley

You've got some good entry-level support staff, and you want to help them advance within your firm. But they don't yet have what it takes to move up: they need a little more professionalism, better communication skills, a sense of career vision. How can you help them develop?

Since 2003 a growing number of firms are putting support staff through the Legal STAR training created by the Volunteer Legal Services Program of the Bar Association of San Francisco, SFWorks, and Jewish Vocational Service. Legal STAR (Skills Training and Advancement Resources) builds communication and career advancement skills in entry-level support staff. Firms are beginning to realize the payoff on their investment. "It gives them the opportunity to get some more 'polish,'" said Mary Bugglin, Administrator at Thelen Reid & Priest. "They grow in promotability." Thelen has sent three staff members to the program and plans to enroll three more this spring.

Supervisor Larry Stevens has noticed a difference in these three individuals. "It's given them a better idea of the big picture of the firm," he says, "the idea that there's a career path for them. It's opened their eyes." One of the alumni was promoted from Office Services Clerk I to Clerk III as a direct result of the training. "He became more efficient and understanding about the law office workflow. He learned to prioritize instead of getting frustrated," Stevens said. The employee's communication and MS Outlook skills also improved. Another trainee gained the confidence and knowledge that enabled her to move from Reception into Records, an area of interest for her.

"We have low turnover in our entry-level staff, and we want to keep it low," said Bugglin. "When people come out of Legal STAR they talk about how good they feel that their firm invested in them."

The legal profession has long benefited from continuing education classes for attorneys, legal assistants and administrators. Support staff also need regular skills-upgrade training, but until now this has not been available in a legal-focused format. Legal STAR's current class of 10 will graduate in June 2005. Another 13 staff have graduated from past cycles, representing 11 law firms and one corporate legal department.

Unlike the Legal Employment Action Program (LEAP), a well-known vocational training program begun by the same nonprofit partners, Legal STAR focuses on current staff rather than job seekers, and is open to all entry-level personnel in the legal sector, whether records clerks, receptionists, case assistants, or other support staff.

Drawing on input from local firms, the 60-hour curriculum consists primarily of Business Communications and Career Management classes from 8:00 to 10:00 a.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays, plus four individual sessions with a career counselor, as well as four lunchtime workshops on topics such as "Superstar Customer Service" and personal finance. The program spans 12 weeks and runs two cycles per year in fall and spring.

"It's a long program," said Mary Whitten, Staff Services Liaison at Morrison & Foerster. "There were times when I thought, 'She's *still* going to those classes?' But in the end I decided it's worth it. It gives people enough time to absorb a different sense of themselves. They learn to take themselves seriously as professionals. A one- or two-day training doesn't have the same impact."

Morrison & Foerster's trainee was a receptionist who had good basic skills, but who had become a bit bored and needed to challenge herself by focusing beyond her day-to-day duties. Legal STAR "really ratcheted up her job performance" and gave the employee new ideas about career paths, said Whitten. She grew in her professionalism, and also in her awareness of what skills she still needed to develop in order to advance.

One strength of the program is that it involves supervisors in supporting what employees learn in their classes. Supervisors meet with their trainees at the beginning to discuss the curriculum and set goals, and then periodically during the course. They are encouraged to participate in the trainee's final meeting with the career counselor to develop an action plan. Afterwards, supervisors provide recognition and reinforcement to the trainee so the new skills and knowledge become an ongoing part of the employee's day-to-day working life and career.

For supervisors who want to deepen their employee development skills, the Legal STAR team conducts a separate 12-hour training for supervisors on coaching techniques and effective delegation.

Legal STAR is available to firms at a fee per participating employee. Discounts are available to firms that refer multiple employees.

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