

Venable Academy: Professional Development through Collaboration and Integration

by Andy Hales

The Venable Academy format has proven highly effective at bringing together not only firm leaders but also other groups of lawyers and promoting greater integration and cooperation.



Born out of the firm's strategic plan from several years ago, the Venable Academy was created to bring together Venable lawyers to learn and to promote greater integration and cooperation among practice groups and across offices.

The content for the Academy, which is offered one to two times each year, is created by the Venable Academy Steering Committee, made up of lawyers from various practice groups, offices, and levels of experience, and including liaisons from functional areas such as professional development, marketing, and practice management. The committee continually assesses "groups" of lawyers who would benefit from getting together as a group in a retreat-style program to learn about and from each other, and then creates content to address a common need for the group.

For example, the Venable Academy for Senior Associates provides a skills component appropriate for that career stage — say, negotiation or supervisory skills — as well as sessions addressing topics likely on the minds of senior associates, such as the path to partnership.

Although the specific information or activities change with each program, all programs share the common goals of (1) enhancing consistency in the delivery of the firm's services and embedding client service into the firm's culture, (2) promoting integration and developing relationships, new and old, and (3) ultimately growing the amount of work through cross-servicing and collaboration. Each program also contains elements of understanding and reinforcing the firm's history, core values, culture, and resources.

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The Venable Academy for Firm Leaders

The firm recently held the Venable Academy for Firm Leaders to bring together Practice Group Leaders, Office Heads, Strategic Business Initiative (SBI) Leaders, and other firm leaders to share best practices and to create the types of opportunities for collaboration that the program was designed to spark.

The day-and-a-half agenda for the program included:

- **Day One** — registration; a discussion about the goals of the Academy (15 min.); presentations of the firm's groups, offices, and strategic initiatives by the leaders (2 hours); a cocktail reception with other partners in the office who were not attending the Academy; and dinner at a partner's house.

- **Day Two** — breakfast; a round-robin breakout exercise to exchange best practices in managing groups and offices (3.5 hours); a round-robin group coaching breakout exercise to discuss business development challenges and opportunities (3.5 hours); and a closing “action steps” session.

Preparation

Because the time away from the office — half a day on a Thursday and all day on Friday — was so significant, the Venable Academy Committee asked the group of busy firm leaders to come prepared. Evenly spaced over ten days leading up to the program were three homework assignments.

Homework #1: Prepare Your “Getting to Know Your Group” Presentation.

The first substantial session of the agenda was for the practice group leaders, office heads, and SBI leaders to give an overview of their offices or areas. The committee created a guide to help the leaders describe their groups or offices and, in 20 seconds or less, explain what services their group provides to clients.

For friendly context, the leaders were told their description “should take no longer to recite than it would take to sing ‘Happy Birthday.’ Be broad but simple.” Their initial introduction was to be no more than the proverbial elevator speech about their practice group.

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The leaders were also asked to come prepared to share information about seven to ten key current clients serviced by the lawyers in their group. “Key” was defined as not being limited to the top revenue-generating clients. Rather, leaders were asked to also think of clients that have been long-term or steady

clients, are high-profile or household names, have innovative legal needs, or are clients they expect will be growth clients in the near future. If the group (or office) frequently services clients in particular industries, those should be identified as well.

The leaders were also asked to share how work is sourced in their group. Does new work come primarily externally or internally? If work is referral based, what are common types of referral sources? If client needs are driven by external trigger events, what are they?

Finally, the practice group leaders were asked to summarize “what they do best.” What features of the practice group sell its services, beyond good lawyering? This might include:

- relationships within an industry or agency;
- authorship of the law or regulations;
- size and depth of the team, inter-disciplinary capabilities;
- attorneys who formerly served in other positions such as government or in-house corporate departments;
- thought leadership;
- significant wins or decisions that are known in the market;
- specialized skills; or
- other sources of value provided to clients.

To assist with their preparation, the practice management department gave each of the leaders a “Metrics Book” that included:

- the top ten clients serviced by timekeepers in their practice group, based on fees billed;
- the top ten clients originated from attorneys in their group;
- the percentage of “exported” work to other divisions in fees billed;
- the percentage of “imported” work from other divisions;
- the lawyer head counts by status and office; and
- other key metrics.

The committee gave each leader a template to ensure consistency and keep the presentations moving as quickly as possible.

Leaders of Strategic Business Initiatives had a similar homework assignment to think about and present the SBI mission, its core capabilities, top clients, etc. Office Heads put together information on office head count by level of experience, practice group representation, goals for expansion, and distinguishing features of the office or the office culture.

As with the Practice Group Leaders, the practice management and accounting departments prepared “Metrics Books” for the SBI Leaders and Office Heads to make the homework assignment a little less daunting.

Homework #2: Read a Management Committee Memo about Practice Group Leadership.

Next, the committee asked the firm leaders to read a memo from the management committee about the role and expectations for leadership and to think about their own experiences around three pillars in the memo: Professional Development, Business Development, and Financial Results. The committee asked the leaders to jot down some of their own best practices and challenges for each of these areas and bring their notes to the program.

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Given the firm’s more than 20 different practice areas and their myriad unique attributes, the memo recognized there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to group leadership. Nevertheless, the firm has expectations that each leader institute processes and practices that are appropriate and effective for his or her group and its members — for example, convening regular meetings to discuss legal and business developments; monitoring workflow and ensuring fair distribution of opportunities; ensuring integration of new associates and laterals; and similar directives

around training, evaluation, diversity and inclusion, financial performance, recruiting, communication, and so on.

Homework #3: Identify Cross-practice Opportunities.

The last of the homework assignments focused on the third segment of the Venable Academy program, a working session on cross-practice marketing. The goal of the session was for leaders to leave with a pledge card with at least five concrete, achievable action items related to cross-practice business development to pursue after the program.

To prepare for this session, leaders were asked to identify four to six clients serviced by their practice group that they believe have a potential, unmined need for services in other practice areas, and to bring their notes on these targets to the program. In their notes, leaders should ask themselves: What has been an obstacle? What type of partner or contact (either generally or by name) could be helpful? Then, in a “group coaching” format, small groups would discuss the four to six targets to generate ideas to help remove these obstacles and pursue business.

To prepare their homework, leaders were encouraged to consult the metrics provided to them in the first homework assignment, and talk with their partners and colleagues in their practice group.

The Program

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The first day of the program was highly informative. Firm leaders, almost by definition, have long tenure at the firm. Many are equity partners who grew up at the firm, arguably best positioned to know the firm’s structure and capabilities, yet they learned (or relearned) so much. The practice group and

office presentations provided a level of depth and detail you cannot find on the firm website or in marketing materials. Understanding, or getting a fresh look at, the strategy behind the groups' clients, the interplay among groups, the percentage of imported and exported work, the lateral hiring and expansion, and other metrics, added a new perspective on truly knowing the firm.

The information on "how work is sourced" and "what we do best" also served as important conversation starters at the cocktail reception. In the spirit of further integration, the committee invited other partners and counsel to join the Venable Academy attendees for drinks and appetizers. Many met their partners from other offices or other practice groups for the first time. Afterward, the Venable Academy attendees went to a partner's home for dinner, providing another opportunity for a warmer, more intimate connection among partners than a restaurant could provide.

The second day of the program was more collaborative. In breakout sessions that mixed up groups three times during a half-day morning session, and three more times during a half-day afternoon session, the firm leaders exchanged best practices and helped each other solve problems.

In the morning session, the group discussed the memo given as Homework #2, and talked about their role as leaders. Tied to the three pillars in the memo — Professional Development, Business Development, and Financial Results — they exchanged ideas and best practices around monitoring and managing workload, diversity, administrative duties, dealing with disruptive behavior, strategic planning for the group, and running the group as a business.

A director from professional development, business development, or practice management facilitated each of the breakout groups, taking a dual role as scribe. So that everyone had the benefit of all of the tips and ideas, the scribes reported highlights from the discussions during lunch.

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In the afternoon session, the leaders referred to their notes from Homework #3 and, in coaching circles, looked for new perspectives on how to tackle specific business development trouble areas. Over and over, the phrase "you know what you could do..." was the catalyst for a new idea, new approach, or new reason to revisit an old contact. This time, the sessions were facilitated by business development professionals who would take notes, develop action plans, and help execute.

Lessons Learned

After the program, the Venable Academy Committee asked the firm leaders to provide their feedback on each of the sessions and to identify the most helpful topics, as well as to share thoughts on areas for improvement. For those who responded, the "Best Practices" session on Day 2 was reported as most helpful, followed by the "Getting to Know Your Group or Office..." session on Day 1. The leaders said they found the program very "motivating and informative" and "enjoyed relearning what the firm does." They also found it valuable to "hear about others' challenges, and get a better understanding of what their colleagues do (or don't do) each day in running a practice group or office."

Among areas for improvement, one leader suggested a pre-Academy survey about the amount of time leaders spend on various functions, for comparison and discussion. An attendee also suggested inviting key client relationship partners to join the Day 2 session on business development.

When asked about the day-and-a-half length of the program, all respondents said "just right" with the exception of one person who thought it too long.

Other Academies

The Venable Academy Committee will likely wait at least two or three years before hosting another Academy for Firm Leaders to ensure these programs remain valuable. When the time comes, new topics to address are plentiful. Strategic planning, giving feedback, lateral hiring trends, diversity training, recognizing substance abuse, and client succession planning are just a few of the topics that are ripe for exploration by firm leaders.

The Venable Academy format has proven to be highly effective for Venable, and the firm intends to continue to develop programs well into the future. The committee has organized Academy programs for other groups including lateral partners and counsel, senior associates, and recently promoted counsel, all with great success. While the content of each of those programs (and future programs) addresses the unique needs of each group, all of the programs share the common theme of professional development through collaboration and integration.

About the Author



Andy Hales is the Senior Director of Professional Development and Training at Venable LLP. He oversees all aspects of lawyer training and development (including CLE and the Venable Academy), associate evaluations, orientation and integration, and diversity. He teaches several programs at the firm including

Project Management, Time Management and Organization, Interview Training, and Evaluations Training. He has been with the firm since 2005. Prior to Venable, Andy was a consultant for Deloitte Consulting, advising large corporations and federal government clients on HR practices, change management, and learning. He is also a former Career Management Consultant and Instructor for the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland. Andy recently served a two-year term on the NALP Board of Directors.