

Debevoise Launches New Feedback Program for Associates

“We’ve really focused on coaching, not grading,” said Nicole Mesard, chair of Debevoise & Plimpton’s hiring committee, who helped develop the new program.

By Meghan Tribe
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Beginning this month, Debevoise & Plimpton is implementing a new feedback scheme across its U.S. offices that will place an emphasis on constant and consistent feedback for associates, aiming to make them better attorneys, faster.

The New York-based firm launched a pilot of its new feedback program earlier this year with about 120 lawyers in two of its practices groups, becoming the latest large law firm to revamp its performance management regime in recent years. Over the next six months, Debevoise & Plimpton will roll out the new program to its other U.S. practice groups, and then eventually overseas.

“We’ve given a lot of thought to what it is like to be an associate at Debevoise,” said Nicole Mesard, chair of the firm’s hiring committee and deputy chair of its corporate department. “What do our associates want from their experience at the firm, and what do we want them to achieve here at the firm? Once they’re here, they’re ours, and we want to make them as great as we can.”



(Courtesy photo)

Nicole Levin Mesard of Debevoise & Plimpton.

The program builds on Debevoise & Plimpton’s existing efforts to help new lawyers meet the requirements of a Big Law practice and career as quickly as possible.

For the last eight years, the firm has partnered with Columbia Business School to conduct a business education program for incoming associates. During their first three weeks at Debevoise & Plimpton, associates take part in an immersion program that is

intended to get them up to speed on concepts critical to their clients' businesses.

But for all that sort of training offers, nothing is as beneficial as being on the job with more experienced lawyers. "That's where the learning really happens," Mesard said.

So Mesard, along with Debevoise & Plimpton litigation partner Maeve O'Connor, worked to develop a feedback program that would give associates more real-time coaching to help them improve while working on matters, rather than relying on formal reviews twice a year.

"We've really focused on coaching, not grading," Mesard said.

After completing a one-and-a-half hour orientation, attorneys circle back with their practice groups. Partners, counsel and other senior attorneys are then expected to give feedback on a constant basis to associates they oversee. Every six to eight weeks, the practice groups meet with a facilitator in "dialogue sessions" to talk about best practices and to ask for advice.

"It's an incredibly collaborative process because we all show each other how vulnerable we are," Mesard said. "It's not easy, [but] we expect all lawyers to be giving feedback, even our most junior lawyers."

Beyond the dialogue sessions, the firm conducts surveys on a regular basis to monitor the amount of feedback happening. So far, the firm says, those numbers are continually increasing.

"The arrow is pointing up in terms of amount of feedback people are getting and receiving," Mesard said.

As with any big changes, there will undoubtedly be hiccups along the way, she acknowledged.

"We can't change everybody," Mesard said. "But even if associates are getting 50 percent more feedback than they used to, even 25 percent more than they used to—wow, isn't that great."

Meghan Tribe is a reporter covering the changing face of Big Law, from lateral moves and work-from-home programs to diversity initiatives. Contact her at mtribe@alm.com. On Twitter: @TribeMeghan