

Dechert's Speakers' Society: Lawyers Help Themselves and Each Other Become Better Speakers

by Molly Peckman

The Speakers' Society not only helps Dechert associates become better speakers, but also has strengthened connections between associates and facilitated the integration of lateral hires.

"Take an important step in your own professional development and sign up today. Join us in this 'PFZ' (partner-free zone) and hone your speaking skills while learning more about the firm, your colleagues, and their practices. There are no dues or secret handshakes or other requirements. Attend the meetings when you can, speak when you are ready, and know this is a resource for you. Practice your presentation skills, receive valuable feedback from your peers, and remember, what happens at the Society stays at the Society."

This is Dechert LLP's new approach to improving associates' presentation skills — the Dechert Speakers' Society.

The Dechert Speakers' Society is a voluntary extracurricular activity and ongoing training program that the firm rolled out last year to all associates across 27 offices. Associates are invited to join and, recognizing the demands and requirements on associates' schedules and lives, the Society has no other demands or requirements. Once they enroll, associates complete self-assessments that ask them to reflect on what they want to work on — whether it be eye contact, thinking and speaking on their feet, getting rid of their "it's," "likes," "y'knows," and other filler words, or tone. The self-assessment also asks about their public speaking experience and whether they have any upcoming presentations.

Society members attend monthly meetings when they are available. No one takes attendance, and attendance is not required, although usually about 50 members attend each month. At each

meeting, associates volunteer to practice presenting three- to five-minute speeches, engage in self-critiques, listen to peer feedback, and receive recordings of their presentations.

Certainly Dechert could have rounded up the usual consultants, pulled out the usual PowerPoint slide decks, and taken out tongue-twisting exercises to try to teach lawyers how to be better speakers. And the firm has done all of that. Prior programs have addressed the basics of oral presentations — from speaking slowly, clearly, and concisely, to avoiding "upspeak" (when it sounds like every sentence is a question).

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Last year, Dechert decided to take an experiential approach to oral communication skill building and get its lawyers on their feet and speaking. The firm launched its version of Toastmasters for lawyers as part of its Critical Skills Institute, the training curriculum associated with Dechert's core competency program. While some call these "soft" skills, Dechert focuses on them as being "critical" to its lawyers' success, at the firm or anywhere. Alongside the all-important substantive, practice-related skills, the Critical Skills are the basis of the firm's training, evaluation, and promotion processes.

There are four main critical skills and fourteen performance factors. One of the main critical skills is communication, and one of the performance factors under that area is oral communications. Dechert does not want the first time any associate delivers a presentation, argues in court, or leads a meeting to be the first time that associate speaks in public. Rather, the firm aims to give associates the chance to learn by doing, to learn from themselves and each other, and to do so in a supportive, comfortable setting.

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For years, Dechert has trained its litigators with simulated depositions and trials, and the firm understands the benefits of hands-on training. The firm is focusing on oral communication this year, especially since most day-to-day communication is not done face-to-face and many associates do not have frequent public speaking opportunities.

The firm invites associates to opt in to the Society. The response and attendance have been higher and more consistent than for any other training program, with Society membership nearing 200 associates. Members come from a cross-section of the firm's offices and practices. They are not just litigators but include numerous transactional lawyers such as tax, employee benefits, financial services, and corporate associates. Membership spreads across levels of experience too, from first-year associates to about-to-be partners. The Society is a partner-free zone, and partners who try to sign up are referred to the firm's Partner Development Program.

Every month, available members join a meeting from across the firm by videoconference. For the Californians, this means early morning starts, and for the Europeans meetings are in the early evening. The meetings start with a recap of the rules, which include the only requirements — mutual respect and confiden-

tiality (a reminder that “what happens at the Society stays at the Society”). The rules recap is followed by quick introductions. The goal is that everyone speak at every meeting, even if just briefly. Introductions include name, practice area, and brief answers to questions that have included:

- What is your hometown and why should I go there?
- Name a great speaker and why he/she is great.
- What two words best describe you?
- Who is your favorite actor/actress and why?
- Who do you think of when asked to picture a leader?

Introductions usually take up the first half of the 60-minute meeting, with the rest of the session reserved for volunteers to present for three to five minutes, followed by peer feedback.

Associates pick their subject matter, which has included new case developments, pro bono experiences, practice insights, and even what it is like to raise twins. Society members have learned about the alphabet soup of the commercial mortgage-backed securitization practice, the basics of employee benefits, and how to keep a client's best interests in mind when facing unforeseen complications in a complex transaction. One associate used the Society as a chance to test out a speech she was delivering to honor a mentor.

After each presentation, speakers are asked to first offer their own perceptions about how they did; they then receive feedback from their colleagues. After the meetings, speakers receive recordings of their presentations that they can watch and listen to at their convenience.

During the meetings, all are encouraged to give each other kind but candid feedback — and they do. Formal training programs are often accompanied by cricket sounds, but Society members speak. And they learn — from watching and listening to others and from watching and listening to themselves. The recordings are valuable parts of the training experience.

At some meetings, the firm focuses on specific areas of interest noted in the self-assessments. An example is a recent program

that featured Jay Sullivan, an external presentation skills coach and consultant from Exec-Comm, who worked with members on the importance of making real eye contact while speaking and included a practice exercise that teamed up the lawyers. Other specific presentations have included programs discussing influence, persuasion, and executive presence. Upcoming programs will address knowing how to maximize PowerPoint and other tools during presentations (and knowing when not to use such tools) and “Taking Elevator Pitches to the Top Floor” (a working session to refine and adapt introductions).

Because of the overwhelming response to the Society, the firm now offers one-on-one coaching sessions with external professional coaches to Society members, and has teamed up with Sullivan and Exec-Comm to do so. So far, more than 80 associates in the firm's largest offices (New York, Philadelphia, London, DC, Paris, and Boston) have participated in 45-minute one-on-one coaching sessions, with more coaching days scheduled for the firm's West Coast and smaller offices this year. The firm wants to invest in those associates who are willing to invest in themselves. The associates who attend the coaching sessions, which are only available to Society members, also receive recorded copies of their practice sessions with the coaches.

Society members work with Dechert's professional development team to review their recordings and to practice presentations before meetings, upcoming oral arguments, practice group talks, and other speeches.

For Dechert, the Society offers additional benefits in addition to the obvious benefit of developing a cadre of experienced speakers across the firm. Meetings allow Society members to get comfortable in the videoconference environment and with the technology (knowing where the cameras are and that they are always on, knowing how the remote controls and mute

microphone options work, and gaining skill in addressing live audiences, even if some are across the world).

The Society gives associates whose paths would otherwise not have crossed an opportunity to “meet” and interact — from the tax associate in Washington, DC, to the finance lawyer in Luxembourg, the intellectual property lawyer in Austin, and the Philadelphia litigator.

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Associates not only teach each other presentation skills but also about their practices — and they learn about each other. They are making real connections, which is important since one day they will be trying to cross-sell each other's skills or pitch to those who become clients.

In addition, the firm believes the Society is a great tool to help integrate new and lateral associates, especially those in smaller offices. And an added benefit is that several of the members' presentations are being turned into continuing legal education and other training programs, which helps to raise the individuals' profiles while helping the firm to fill its training schedule with quality programming and quality speakers.

Most of the associates take their Society meeting presentations seriously and prepare in advance. A few have admitted to occasions when they wished they had spent more time preparing, which is also a valuable lesson. Did other members criticize the lack of practice during the peer feedback at meetings? Remember, what happens at the Society stays at the Society.

About the Author



Molly Peckman is Dechert LLP's Global Director of Legal Talent. She has over 25 years of law firm experience and is responsible for building and oversight of an integrated Legal Talent Department, including attorney training and development; legal personnel matters including associate evaluations and compensation;

new and lateral associate orientation and integration; and alumni relations for Dechert's 950+ lawyers and alumni worldwide.

Prior to joining Dechert, Molly led another firm's professional development program for five years and, before that, she was a trial lawyer in Philadelphia, practicing in the areas of commercial, medical malpractice, and employment litigation. Prior to her legal career, Molly worked in the field of public relations.

Molly served for two years as chair of NALP's Lawyer Professional Development Section and has held a number of leadership positions with the Philadelphia Bar Association. She is a member of the Professional Development Consortium, NALP, the ABA, the Philadelphia and Pennsylvania Bar Associations, and other legal organizations. Molly is a frequent writer and lecturer on legal talent management and law firm life. She can be reached at molly.peckman@dechert.com or 215-994-2302.