
Running a Legal Function Course: Team Structure, Outside Counsel, Budgets and Board Reporting

18 – 22 October 2026
Zoom





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Programme Summary

Running a legal function is the subject of this one-week training course for senior lawyers moving into head of legal and general counsel roles, ending in a legal function operating plan for one team. Lawyers are promoted for their advice, then find the work is now priorities, people, outside counsel, spend and reporting. The programme moves from the shift from adviser to leader, through team design and workload, to outside counsel, budgets and board reporting. Mars Training Centre UK delivers this programme in running a legal function.

The Business Case

When a new legal head keeps working as the best lawyer in the room, work queues build, outside counsel are instructed without control and the business learns of risk late and cannot plan for it. Leaders who set priorities, share work and report plainly give executives earlier warning and spend legal budgets where the risk lies, with the whole team contributing.

- Legal Spend: Becomes controllable as matters are budgeted, instructed and compared with actual cost.
- Advice Turnaround: Improves as work is triaged by risk and shared across the team.
- Risk Visibility: Rises as executives and the board receive regular, plain reports.

Principles and Evidence Base

- Risk matrix: Likelihood and impact scoring ranks matters in Session 2.
- Budget-to-actual spend tracking: Comparing planned and incurred cost shapes the outside counsel work of Session 3.
- Situational leadership: Matching management style to each lawyer's skill and confidence guides Session 1.
- Legal operations: Its view of the legal department as a managed function shapes Session 5.

Intended Participants

- Senior lawyers newly responsible for a legal team.
- Legal managers who allocate and review the work of other lawyers.
- Heads of legal who instruct and pay outside firms.
- Deputies who prepare legal reports for boards.

The programme serves in-house teams in banks, energy companies, construction groups and public bodies.



Learning Outcomes

1. Participants will be able to evaluate their own shift from adviser to leader.
2. Participants will be able to design a legal team structure with clear roles, workload and development paths.
3. Participants will be able to prioritise incoming matters by risk using a scoring matrix.
4. Participants will be able to construct a legal budget and an outside counsel instruction process.
5. Participants will be able to justify legal advice to executives as risks and options.
6. Participants will be able to defend a board report on legal risk, spend and team performance.

Programme Structure

Day 1: From Practising Lawyer to Running a Legal Function

What changes when a lawyer becomes the person accountable for a whole team?

- Adviser to Leader Role Shift Map
- Situational Leadership Style Matching
- Legal Function Mandate Statement
- Stakeholder Expectation Interview Plan
- First Ninety Days Priority List

Day 2: Team Design, Workload and Risk Priorities

How should a legal team be organised so that the right work reaches the right lawyer?

- Team Structure and Role Options
- Work Intake and Triage Protocol
- Risk Matrix Matter Ranking
- Delegation and Review Rules
- Lawyer Development and Retention Plan

Day 3: Outside Counsel and Legal Spend

How are external firms chosen, instructed and held to budget?

- Make or Buy Legal Work Analysis
- Panel Firm Selection Criteria
- Instruction Letter and Fee Arrangement Design
- Matter Budget and Budget-to-Actual Tracking
- Outside Counsel Performance Review



Day 4: Advising the Business and Reporting to the Board

How is legal risk explained so that executives can decide?

- Business Partnering Engagement Model
- Risk Options and Recommendation Paper
- Executive Briefing Structure
- Legal Dashboard Indicator Set
- Board Legal Report Template

Day 5: Applying Running a Legal Function to One Team

Is the operating plan ready for the chief executive or board to endorse?

- Applying the Session 1 Mandate Statement to the Chosen Team
- Testing the Session 2 Triage Protocol Against Live Matters
- Matching the Session 3 Budget to Outside Counsel Plans
- Checking the Session 4 Dashboard and Board Report
- Completing the Legal Function Operating Plan

Methodology

The programme is built around structured exercises. Participants work in small teams on anonymised legal department cases from banking, energy and public sector settings, taking the roles of new head of legal, deputy and chief executive, and test each management decision against a realistic workload and budget, recording the reasons for each choice.

- Suggested activity: Triaging a list of matters by risk and deciding who handles each.
- Suggested activity: Reviewing an outside counsel invoice against its budget and drafting the reply.
- Suggested activity: Rewriting a legal opinion as a one-page options paper for a chief executive.

Capstone Output

Each participant completes a legal function operating plan for one team. It holds a mandate statement, a team structure, a triage protocol, a legal budget with an outside counsel process and a board report template. It is used to agree priorities with the chief executive.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is running a legal function suitable for lawyers with no management experience?

Yes. Running a legal function is set at senior level and assumes you practise law with some seniority, not that you have managed a team before.



Which models does running a legal function rest on in this training?

Running a legal function rests on risk matrix scoring, budget-to-actual spend tracking, situational leadership and legal operations thinking, applied to team, spend and reporting choices.

How is the operating plan from running a legal function used at work?

You use the operating plan to agree priorities with the chief executive, brief your team, control outside counsel spend and plan board reporting.

How does running a legal function differ from a corporate law programme?

Running a legal function centres on managing people, outside counsel, spend and reporting, while a corporate law programme centres on the content of the law itself.