

Frequently Asked Questions About Practice Group Leadership

by
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Because law firms compete and deliver services primarily at the practice group level, and because firm goals are commonly executed through the practice groups, it is imperative to develop a well-functioning practice group structure with highly capable leaders. Although this sounds reasonable – and reasonably easy to accomplish – it is something that law firms of all sizes and practice types struggle with, from the leadership selection process, to training, planning, evaluation and compensation.

In our work with law firm leaders, we are frequently asked questions like the following about practice group leadership...

Managing Partner: *How should we select new practice group leaders?*

Altman Weil: Practice leaders should be selected primarily for their ability to do the job. Consider criteria like demonstrated leadership and management skills as well as relational, communication, delegation and lawyering skills. Willingness and enthusiasm to do the job, firm-mindedness and a track record of getting things done are also important selection factors. Don't make the selection based on seniority, book of business, underutilization or ego. Effective leadership is defined by results, not attributes. Who will get the best results?

MP: *What is the right way to view the job of the practice leader?*

AW: The practice group leader can be seen as managing a business unit. It's a real job – one that requires time, attention and effort. You should provide each practice leader with a written job description that sets forth the general responsibilities and expectations. Groups should be focused externally on clients, strategy, competitiveness and growth, not internally on administrative matters. You should try to reduce the group leaders' administrative burdens as much as possible because that is not the highest and best use of their time. Ideally, priorities for your firm's practice group leaders should be jointly developed with firm management through a formal planning process.

MP: *Some of our practice group leaders have no management or leadership experience. How will they figure this out?*

AW: It is not unusual for lawyers to have limited management experience or for new practice leaders to protest that they didn't go to law school to become managers. Some may be fearful of failing, although they may not verbalize it that way. Firm management should help equip them to do the job by providing them with a written job description, clearly defined expectations, and initial and ongoing training. In addition, the practice leaders should meet regularly as a group to discuss challenges and opportunities and to share ideas, experience and best practices. The idea is that the firm wants and needs the practice leaders to succeed and will make investments in developing their leadership and management skills.

MP: *If we can only have leadership ability OR management ability in a practice leader, which one do we want?*

AW: You are going to need both, and although the two are not mutually exclusive, you don't always get both in one person. You're going to have some practice leaders who are not natural leaders but can still get the job done. Others may be visionary leaders who need a deputy or administrative support so they don't get bogged down or turned off by the details. Again, you will increase the leadership and management capability of your practice leaders by providing regular training and opportunities for the group leaders to talk to and learn from each other. The best firms have individual development plans for each of their leaders, based on specific needs and goals.

MP: *The practice leaders want to know how much time the job going to take. What is reasonable to expect?*

AW: Usually the answer is: more time than they think. Effective practice leadership requires that the leader build high-trust relationships with each member of his or her group, which takes time and commitment. Our research shows that the amount of time spent by practice leaders in the role is the factor that correlates most strongly with overall practice group effectiveness. The amount of time required by an individual practice leader depends on the size, scope and "degree of difficulty" of the group, but in general, the most effective practice leaders spend more than 250 hours a year on leadership and management to execute the responsibilities on their job description, achieve the goals in their group plan, and generate the kind of results you want to see.

MP: *Our practice leaders don't have 250 hours available. If they can't do everything, what are the most important priorities?*

AW: The most important thing is to have a plan and work the plan. Each group's plan should identify two or three high-priority goals to be attained within a reasonable period of time. It will also be a good idea for them to track and record their management time, which will provide hard facts that allow you and them to assess where their management time goes and how they can spend and invest their management time most effectively. A collaborative review of their management time could be made a regular part of their training and review. As management guru Peter Drucker observed, efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things. The "right things" should be set forth in their group plan and agreed to by management.

MP: *How should we hold our practice leaders accountable for results in the role?*

AW: It's a real job, and important to the firm, so it's important to measure and reward results. The practice leaders should be evaluated annually based on effort (quantity and quality of time spent) and especially results (progress against plan). They should expect to be evaluated fairly and rewarded for achievement. Accountability runs both ways and requires frequent "touches" between firm management and the practice leaders. Management must be in regular, face to face communication with practice leaders, give constructive feedback on practice group plans, help set priorities, make resources available to achieve goals, and deliver specific performance feedback, including formal evaluations not less than annually.

MP: *The practice leaders are skeptical that they will really be rewarded (or at least not penalized) for spending time on leadership and management, rather than billing time. Billable hours have historically been closely linked to compensation in our firm.*

AW: There will always be a high level of natural skepticism – these are lawyers. Assure them that management recognizes the trade-offs they are being asked to make, and make clear that you are asking for a greater overall contribution. Each practice leader will still be expected to maintain a vibrant practice and meet personal financial targets. If they are doing their best as a practice leader, there will be upside rewards. If they are not trying, or are trying but failing, their compensation will not suffer but they will be replaced as practice leader. Some firms pay their practice leaders a stipend or give credit for management hours as if those hours were billed and collected, up to a certain number of hours. It is important for new practice leaders to understand that they are going to work harder than their partners and will have to delegate management tasks to keep from getting overwhelmed.

MP: *Should practice leaders have input into individual compensation decisions for the lawyers in their groups?*

AW: The answer may differ from firm to firm. In general, practice leaders serve with the authority of the Management Committee and report regularly to that body. By year two of their leadership tenure, they should have input into compensation for the people in their group. By year three, they should have significant knowledge and input into compensation decisions. Again, these are guidelines – each firm’s history and circumstances will factor into what can be accomplished and how quickly.

MP: *We are looking at practice leadership as a training ground for firm management. Is that appropriate?*

AW: A practice leader does not have to be a candidate for a firm management role, but certainly their performance is likely to qualify or disqualify them and is a good way to identify leadership potential. The way we see it, your practice leaders are vitally important to the overall success of the firm, whether or not they aspire to, or are suited for, firm management. They are primarily responsible for the health, growth and performance of their groups and while some of them may be developing the capability to someday lead the firm, the primary goal is effective practice leadership right now.

MP: *What other words of encouragement can you offer me as the leader of these leaders?*

AW: Find a way to get these “six P’s” across to your practice group leaders:

Patience: Be patient with yourself. You’ve never done this before, you won’t get it exactly right, and that’s okay, as long as you are trying and learning and growing. It takes time and experience to master anything new. We want you to take the job seriously, but don’t be too hard on yourself. It’s a difficult assignment; allow yourself time to figure it out and let us help you succeed.

Participation: Attend Practice Group Leader meetings as student, teacher and fellow traveler. Strive to share and learn and improve. Stay in communication with firm management and your fellow practice leaders. “All of us are smarter than any of us.”

Plan: It really helps to have a written plan for your group that you, we, and your group members can keep in front of us. Let’s determine a short list of priorities for your first year and make sure you have scheduled time to focus on them.

Push it out: Delegate! Use your colleagues and staff to help wherever possible. Delegation is not getting others to do your job, it's getting rid of everything that can be done by somebody else. The fact that you have taken on extra responsibilities does not mean you have to do everything yourself.

People: Don't forget it's about people – and dealing with people is time-consuming and messy. Prepare to make a significant time investment in getting to know and understand your people and assume it will take more time than you wish. And finally...

Pom-poms: Management is behind you and wants you to succeed. Your group members and partners want you to succeed as well, because your success is their success. Fear not – you can do this.

These are probably not the only questions you will have on the subject of practice group leadership, but they deal with issues that are typically encountered in forming new groups and appointing new practice leaders. It is very important to provide role clarity, make resources available, be clear how the practice leaders will be evaluated and rewarded, provide training, ensure regular communication and recognize their achievements. By keeping these things in mind, you should be able to make progress toward realistic goals without getting stuck.

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