

How Can Managing Partners Optimize Practice Group Leader Performance?

By [Susan Raridon Lambreth](#) on December 16, 2020

This post originally appeared November 11, 2020 in PinHawk's [Legal Administrator Daily](#).

To say that the pandemic issued in an era of intense uncertainty would be to understate the obvious. And during these uncertain times, leadership is more critical than ever. In an article I wrote a few months ago, I asked the question, "[Are you leading your practice group effectively?](#)".

Practice group and department leaders play increasingly important roles in the management of the most successful law firms. They are expected to perform at very high levels in order to meet the demands of their role and to help their groups achieve the desired goals set by firm management. For managing partners and others in firm leadership, the challenge is how to maximize the potential of the group by providing the necessary guidance, support, tools and other resources that will position them for success.

Too often, once practice leaders are in place, there are not clearly-set expectations for them and their groups. Effective leaders need training, communication and accountability to be effective. Absent these important elements, the practice group may fail to realize the actual benefits of the practice management structure. These benefits include:

- Consistent high levels of performance (profitability, lawyer retention, client acquisition and satisfaction)
- Strong levels of lawyer satisfaction
- Better planning for the future
- Strategic alignment of resources
- Effective sharing of knowledge and expertise
- Equitable management across practice groups

So, what should managing partners be doing to optimize the performance of their practice leaders? In the first of a two-part article, we've found the following to be key factors in developing high-performing leaders.

Set Clear Objectives and Expectations for Each Practice Group and Leader

It is difficult for any leader to perform well if the expectations of the leader and their practice group are not clearly defined. If, as Managing Partner, your goal is to have high-performing practice leaders, then setting and agreeing on personal and group goals is a necessity. And, the more clear and measurable the expectations, the more effective they will be in driving the desired outcomes.

Not every practice group and practice leader can be expected to perform at the same level or achieve the same objectives. The role of the managing partner should be to work with each practice group leader to set a small number (no more than three) of realistic performance goals that are aligned with firm objectives, practice strengths and opportunities,

and market realities.

Keep in mind that practice group performance and practice leader performance are not necessarily the same. As Managing Partner, you must be careful to evaluate practice leaders based not only on how their group performs, but also on how well they achieve the objectives you set with them for their personal roles as leaders. A group may have certain goals and the leader may have different, more private goals set by firm management. For example, you may have a practice group that has internal dissension issues that require significant practice leader time to resolve. Assuming the group leader did the right things to work on these issues, they would be rewarded for this, even if the group does not see immediate improvement.

Candid Communication with Practice Leaders

Engage in regular and substantive dialogue with your practice leaders, both individually and as a group. This is imperative for developing a strong leadership team. We further recommend that managing partners conduct quarterly one-on-one meetings with practice leaders. The purpose is to:

- Review the status of business plans;
- Troubleshoot problems and challenges;
- Discuss evolving opportunities;
- Address resource needs and personnel issues; and
- Deal with other, practice-specific, matters.

These meetings are also opportunities for Managing Partners to reinforce expectations, offer advice and direction, and build personal relationships that foster mutual trust and respect. For the practice leader, they provide a forum for private discussions about practice members, personal performance and other, more sensitive topics.

Dynamic Communication Among Practice Leaders

Managing Partners should also play a role in promoting communications *between* practice leaders. Most firms bring their practice leaders together at least three to four times a year. Pre-Covid, these meetings were typically held in-person for a day or more at one of the firm's office locations. Nowadays, the meeting is likely to be virtual. Either way, these meetings provide a critical forum that allows leaders to:

- Share best practices;
- Discuss market and client intelligence;
- Address common cross-group management issues; and
- Explore new business and client service opportunities.

During these meetings, Managing Partners can also relate important firm developments on behalf of the Executive Committee and test the waters on strategic matters for which the buy-in and support from the practice leaders are needed. Although Managing Partners typically preside over these meetings, they should not degenerate into monologues. The most effective meetings are dynamic; structured to promote active participation by all practice leaders. In fact, having about $\frac{1}{4}$; or 1/3 of the practice leaders present their goals or other opportunities for their group to the other

leaders each meeting is a powerful way to engage all the leaders.

Now, with most professionals working remotely, many firms have increased the frequency of their practice leader meetings. Firms and practice leaders face increasing challenges and grapple with more novel issues than ever before. It is now common to see monthly or bi-monthly, albeit shorter, meetings.

We have seen firms gain significant benefits from regular practice leader meetings. To name a couple:

- Leaders truly feel part of firm management; and
- They gain confidence that their contributions are important to the success of the firm.

Join us next month for [Part 2](#) of this article where we'll discuss other critical factors for optimizing the performance of Practice Leaders.