

## Are You Leading Your Practice Group Effectively?

By [Susan Raridon Lambreth](#) on June 9, 2020

Our [LawVision Covid-19 Recovery Playbook](#) is packed with actionable advice. One of the top ten recommendations is that “Firmwide practice group leaders need to know how to **lead and manage in a virtual world** – a goal that requires a whole new set of skills.”

Yet, on a recent video call, one of the attendees from a major firm commented: “Our practice group leaders were not leading well when they were live with their members. They *really* don’t know how to lead virtually.”

Granted, there are aspects of leadership that are the same or similar whether face-to-face or virtual. Other aspects are different, however – not only with a virtual workforce but in a VUCA world, as well – a time of great Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity.

So how is leadership different in a more virtual VUCA world and workforce? Over the past 25 years, I have taught literally thousands of practice group leaders how to lead and manage their departments and practice groups more effectively. Some of the principles work no matter the environment. But, your leaders must understand how to use them.

Let’s first look at core elements of effective leadership. According to decades of research by Kouzes and Posner, there are five practices that “exemplary leaders” follow. They are described as:

1. Model the way
2. Inspire a shared vision
3. Challenge the process
4. Enable others to act
5. Encourage the heart<sup>[1]</sup>

There could never be a more important time for practice group leaders to implement these five practices. What would it mean for law firms? Here’s how it might look:

### Model the Way

Everyone has heard the expression you have to “walk the talk,” not just talk the talk. There is no faster way to lose credibility as a leader than to exhibit hypocrisy.

Demonstrate to others that you are going to do exactly what you are asking them to do. This means modeling the appropriate behaviors, responses and actions that support the end goal. This is even more important in times of crisis when others look to you for unwavering leadership, guidance and assurance.

Communicate clearly and regularly. Fear is driven by the unknown. But in the VUCA environment, when you give yourself permission to not know, you also allow yourself time to discover. In fact, it’s okay to tell your group that you are actively searching for answers. Now is the time to build trust by communicating consistently with as much transparency as the situation warrants.

Feeling pessimistic about the future? Not sure that your group will survive? Limiting beliefs are obvious to your group members. Put your energy into problem solving. Embrace empowerment by studying the market and gathering client input to assess the full impact of the crisis. It is critical for the group to understand that the work they do will continue to align with evolving client needs. You must lead the way.

## Inspire a Shared Vision

During a state of flux, most experts say that annual or longer-range strategic planning is not realistic. Still, it is critical to help the practice group create a shared vision and engage with all the group members. In Kouzes and Posner's book, The Leadership Challenge, the authors describe two elements of this: (1) to envision the future and (2) to enlist others. In the corporate world, a leader might be able to provide his or her own vision to the team and then seek to build top-down consensus.

However, in the law firm environment, buy-in is most effectively built through engagement and influence. When every partner is an owner, it is critical for the practice group leader to facilitate a dialogue which will shape the vision and engage the partners to design future that they desire. In other words, the vision must grow organically.

Given the current uncertainty, the vision may only encompass the next three months or so, providing a framework to respond to client requirements in the near term. The vision might include elements like the need to:

- Develop new services to replace existing ones that are no longer salient, or
- Identify alternative business models to bolster firm profitability and address the financial pressures that many clients are facing.

## Challenge the Process

Complacency keeps us safely inside the box. But safe is not a viable competitive position, nor is it a way to differentiate a law firm. Historically, exemplary leaders challenged the status quo. They did not subscribe to the old familiar mantra: "We've always done it this way." Today, any lingering complacency should have been rooted out by the events of the past few months. Out of the depths of this crisis emerges even greater opportunity. The imperative is for leaders who will boldly carry their groups into a new world.

Challenging the process involves searching for alternative ways to provide legal services. In recent years, more firms are recognizing that the old models are, if not broken, at least losing effectiveness. For today, that means that many firms will focus on innovation. The most progressive firms will experiment, taking risks and asking probing questions.

Given the practice group's strengths, values and capabilities, leaders should ask:

- Where are these new opportunities?
- How far should we push our new processes for greater success?
- How do we turn new processes into competitive advantage?
- Are the rewards worth the risks?

## Enable Others to Act

Leaders are not needed to supervise other high-level professionals. Rather, they enable and inspire them, helping to remove obstacles to their performance. How does this look today when some of your top producers may be paralyzed by fear amidst the uncertainty of the current market? Encourage your strongest players to keep moving forward and to take calculated risks. Enable others to act by fostering collaboration, not only within the practice group but across the firm.

There will be winners and losers coming out of this crisis. If history repeats itself, as it often does, the losers will be those who are afraid to step away from the well-worn paths of the past. Conversely, the winners will take the risks needed to emerge stronger than ever.

### Encourage the Heart

Exemplary leaders recognize the contributions of others and give credit where credit is due. They celebrate victories both as a group and for individuals. In addition to promoting group cohesion, this helps facilitate an inclusive team. Over the past few months, as firms worked remotely, many people felt displaced and disconnected. The best leaders communicated regularly. This ensures that group members feel valued and heard during these difficult times, creating a powerful sense of engagement that contributes to the practice group's success.

As you think about your leadership as a PGL or the performance of your firm's PGLs, which of these areas need the most work? Review your efforts over the past few months and identify where you can most impact the group by renewed focus on one or more of the areas above. Based on decades of research, your practice group's performance should improve significantly as a result.

[1] Please read their excellent books, *The Leadership Challenge* and *The Truth About Leadership* for more detail.