

## Optimizing Practice Group Leader Performance (Part 2)

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

*This post originally appeared November 30, 2020 in PinHawk [Legal Administrator Daily](#).*

We may not yet have a remedy for the pandemic, but we do have some tools in our arsenal to deal with uncertainty. [In Part 1 of this series](#), we discussed three key factors in developing high-performing leaders. They were:

- Clear objectives and expectations for practice groups and leaders
- Candid communication with practice leaders
- Dynamic communication among practice leaders

In Part 2, we'll continue our discussion to include additional critical factors. If you want a refresher, go back and review Part 1.

### Ongoing Leadership Development

In the corporate world, managers and leaders receive dozens of hours of training each year to prepare them for their roles and responsibilities. In law firms, too many in management positions receive either no formal training or training that is infrequent or insufficient and perhaps both. Lectures and brown bag sessions may be informative, but they are poor substitutes for effective leadership training. True leadership development is interactive, skills-based, and requires several hours on a given topic.

Lawyers assume all learning is information transfer, like a typical "CLE" session. But, in fact, to actually teach complex behaviors like influence, giving feedback, building resilience, gaining buy-in, and more, the learning needs to occur over a series of sessions.

Leadership is dynamic because the competitive landscape is rapidly changing. This is true now more than ever. Leadership development for practice leaders needs to include these elements:

- Interactive practice to build skills;
- Coaching to enhance skills; and
- Assessment tools and feedback to continuously improve skills.

Topics for the skills sessions typically include, for example:

- Building high performing teams
- Understanding lawyer personalities
- Leading change
- Giving constructive and effective performance feedback

- Creating engagement in your talent base
- Developing effective strategy and group business plans that actually get implemented, and more.

Sessions like this are also very powerful for creating more engagement among the practice leaders and greater commitment to performing the roles. This can result in improvements in the practice groups that pay for the workshop costs (and the lawyers' otherwise billable time in the training) many times over.

Law firms would never think of asking a lawyer to handle a particular type of legal matter without sufficient preparation and training. It is just as critical to offer regular, systematic training and development programs for practice leaders.

Training is not once and done. As professionals, we must continue to learn and grow. Practice leaders need no fewer than two full days of management and leadership training each year in order to keep skills fresh and to develop new ones. Commit to a schedule. Plan to have your practice leaders meet at least three times a year for at least one day of training, with some coaching and feedback on their skills development in between the sessions. As we continue in the remote working mode, the day of training might be spread across two half-day sessions in one week.

### **Documented Progress and Accountability Measures**

Managing Partners should meet with practice leaders throughout the year to track progress against goals, address issues that may be affecting performance, discuss resource needs, and make sure their duties are being fulfilled according to plans. We recommend that Managing Partners have formal meetings with practice leaders quarterly so that impediments to performance goals can be minimized or eliminated quickly.

However, Managing Partners should also make a habit of "walking the halls." If you can't physically walk the halls right now, then you can do it virtually. The idea is to be visible and available to practice leaders in their locations on a regular basis. By walking the halls (which might mean bi-weekly virtual check-ins by video call with your practice leaders), you're better able to monitor progress, coach and offer guidance, troubleshoot, and simply lend a hand to the firm's practice leaders when needed.

In return for high levels of empowerment, practice leaders are expected to be accountable for performance goals and metrics. This means having consequences for falling short. Managing Partners must impose a level of accountability on its practice heads to not only motivate the desired behavior but also to demonstrate the firm's commitment to high-performing groups and successful practice management.

In addition to progress meetings, there are various ways that firms hold their leaders accountable. Some firms use an "upward review" where the group members and firm management provide feedback to the practice leader on their performance. This kind of feedback is critical to enable practice leaders to enhance their leadership effectiveness. Other firms go a step further, factoring the results into the leader's compensation.

A growing number of firms replace the practice leader if expectations are not met within a defined period of time. This underscores the growing importance of practice leaders. Firm leadership is signaling that they are no longer willing to allow an ineffective leader to compromise the success of a practice group or undermine its contributions to the firm's overall performance. There is too much lost opportunity when a group has a poor leader, if not worse consequences like attrition of talented professionals or clients.

It has been our experience that practice leaders want to perform at a high level. They may be ineffective, however, for one

of several reasons:

- The practice leader has not been provided clear job descriptions and expectations as well as adequate leadership training and coaching.
- Partners have not truly “bought into” the empowerment of practice groups and their leaders.
- The practice leader does not have or cannot learn the relevant characteristics, behaviors, or skills to be effective.

The latter, on its own, is rare. Most times, it is a combination of two or all three factors that undermine the overall effectiveness of practice leaders. With active involvement, support, and guidance from the Managing Partner, practice leaders can be better prepared to meet and even exceed performance expectations.

With the five areas outlined in Part 1 and Part 2 of this series – clear objectives and expectations, candid communication with practice leaders, dynamic communication among practice leaders, ongoing leadership development, established progress and accountability measures – you can launch your firm on the path toward developing successful practice groups and leaders.