Practice Group Success: Don't Just Plan, Implement (Part 1)

By Susan Raridon Lambreth on April 6, 2021

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Not much happens without a plan. It's how the most effective practice groups operate. The purpose is threefold. The plan helps:

- Create group cohesion,
- Establish metrics and goals to measure group performance and determine compensation,
- Identify trends and opportunities to leverage, and
- Inform decisions regarding firm strategy and resource allocations.

Most practice groups have a plan, if for no other reason than that they are used to budget scarce resources – marketing dollars or staff time, professional development expenses, lateral hire compensation, recruiters' fees, etc. The problem is that practice group plans, too frequently, simply are not executed. In fact, a mediocre plan implemented is arguably better than the best plan gathering dust on a credenza or on your intranet.

Why do some plans gain traction while others do not? There are five steps that your practice group can take to help ensure that your well-conceived plan is not only implemented but achieves the results you expect. We'll cover three of these steps in Part 1 of our two-part series.

1. Firm management must provide feedback on practice group plans.

In many firms historically, management requested practice group plans from their group leaders. Once submitted however, these plans were not reviewed or discussed until the plans are requested again, sometimes a year or two later. In fact, in some firms, practice leaders tell us they know that the plans are not read. How do they know this? Management fails to detect that the only change from the previous year's plan is the cover!

There's a quid pro quo violation here. When practice groups invest the time required to develop the plan, firm management must provide thoughtful feedback and consider the following questions:

- How does it align with the firm's strategy?
- Is it likely to support competitive advantage for the group?
- Are we providing client value?
- What resources are justified?
- And Overall, is it on the right or wrong track?

When firm management provides feedback, these plans become extremely valuable tools to guide the practice groups and maximize firm resources. As an important side benefit, reviewing the plans can help firm management identify potential areas of future strategic or positional conflicts with other practice groups or firm priorities that may cause later

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problems.

2. All practice group partners should develop — not just agree to — the plan.

Here's how many plans fail: The practice group leader drafts a document and circulates it for input. This is an easy approach, but it's far from adequate. Even if the leader gets significant input, positive or otherwise, from everyone in the group, sign-off is not the same as buy-in. This isn't a vote on a catered lunch.

You must get the active participation part right. If full in-person participation is impractical, solicit group opinions through smaller sub-groups. Real commitment and genuine buy-in necessitate involvement. Many firms initiate or finish the planning process during the (at least pre-COVID 19 in-person) annual firm or practice group retreat. Wherever possible, include associates in plan development, as well. They have valuable insights, can offer highly innovative ideas (as they are typically less stymied by tradition), and are critical to implementation. With large groups, this may be by survey or focus groups. In smaller groups, they might participate in "live" or virtual planning meetings.

3. The practice group must inform the business plan with a rigorous assessment of its market position.

Whether your business plan is simple or complex, begin the process by thoroughly assessing the practice group from both an external and internal perspective. Start with the ubiquitous SWOT analysis, or another favorite, to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. However, resist the temptation inherent in many of these analytical tools to navel-gaze and self-congratulate. There is much to do. The post-pandemic world and ever-emerging technologies have created a new reality. Competitive forces and market-altering trends will affect many practices during the coming decade. There will be no better opportunities than the ones you have today. Be sure that you challenge your group to candidly evaluate the market and your firm's current position through a few critical questions:

- What services does your group currently offer?
- How are your clients and their needs changing?
- What trends, both positive and negative, affect these services?
- Who is your competition (e.g., law firms, in-house legal departments, law companies and alternative providers, etc.)? and, most importantly,
- What truly differentiates your practice group vis-à-vis the competition?

The last question is most frequently left out of practice group assessments or are addressed superficially with language such as:

- It is the quality of our lawyers that distinguishes us.
- We offer world-class legal service.

Every firm makes these same statements – and believes that they are true. These things are, of course, important. But in what ways does your firm distinguish itself from others that have "exemplary lawyers" and "superlative customer service"? Selling points that can distinguish your group include characteristics such as:

- In-depth industry knowledge
- Technology applications that provide value-add for clients

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- Credible market rankings or ratings
- Significant demonstrable experience and critical mass in an area of expertise

Don’t shortchange this discovery process, as challenging as it can be. This is a good use of outside resources that can infuse greater objectivity into the process, helping you discover how your firm actually differentiates itself in the market.

Watch this space for the next article in the series. We’ll tell you what else you should consider as you differentiate your offerings and formulate your SMART goals. If you’ve struggled with how to create these goals in the past, don’t miss Part 2.

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