

Practice Group Success: Don't Just Plan, Implement (Part 2)

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To implement your practice group vision, you need a good plan. In Part 1 of this three-part series, we proposed an approach to help practice groups implement sound practice plans. The components included management feedback, partner participation, and a rigorous market assessment. If you missed Part 1, you can read it [here](#). In Part 2, we'll cover two more requirements for the successful implementation of a practice plan. They include:

- Develop a true business plan, not just a marketing plan.
- Make your goals SMART.

1. Ensure that Your Practice Group Plan is Actually a Business Plan

It's not just a matter of semantics. The marketing plan is an essential document that outlines implementable strategies, tactics, and activities that help the group achieve attract and retain the clients it desires. But, a truly effective business plan is where the rubber meets the road – what services does the group offer and how, what mix of talent does it need, how does it deliver its service – so that it can actually attract the clients identified in marketing objectives. Marketing is critically important, but it is one element of a strategic business plan. The business plan goes further, proposing the strategies that you will deploy to achieve your overall business goals and objectives – talent, service mix, business model/service delivery approaches, use of technology and so much more.

Essentially, your business plan should address:

- Where is the practice today (what are we offering, to what clients, industries or niches, what trends are driving change, and who is the competition)?
- Where do we want it to be in 6 months to 2 years (in terms of specific goals as described below)?
- What differentiates us from our current and potential competitors in ways that are meaningful to current and prospective clients?
- What will it take to move the practice from its current position to its desired position – in particular, to deal with the trends and the competitors?

The practice group business plan clearly specifies your group's goals, and provides the information needed to inform competitive strategies. It may include the identification of trends, competition, and resources, as well as the breadth and depth of your specialized expertise, service delivery capabilities (including technology and process), talent and acquisition strategies, innovation and risk management.

2. Make Your Goals Smart

Good performance starts with clear goals. We like SMART goals. They aren't new. They've been around since the early

1980s. We continue to use the framework because it works. As a refresher, here's what the acronym means:

- **Specific:** What do you want to accomplish and why? By whom? Which resources will you need and where will you need them?
- **Measurable:** How will you demonstrate and evaluate the extent to which the goal has been met?
- **Achievable:** Is the goal attainable and realistic while still providing sufficient "stretch"?
- **Relevant:** How is the goal aligned to the practice group's and the firm's objectives?
- **Time-bound:** When will you complete the goal?

Although the beauty of the framework is in its simplicity, it can be difficult to ensure that your goals actually are SMART. That's because there's more to execution than simply putting some words on paper. The context is as important as the content. The most effective practice group goals are developed within the following construct:

- There is a sense of urgency and forward momentum within the practice group.
- Most, if not all, of the partners, are involved in the goal-planning sessions.
- The goals are owned by most, if not all, members of the group, rather than just a few individuals.
- The goals are common and interrelated, supporting the overall vision of the firm.

Moreover, practice groups can struggle to create goals, only to settle on a list of aspirations and action steps. These non-goal goals (and examples excerpted from actual law firm plans) include:

- Action steps to achieve a goal, but not actual goals
 - Example: "Hire N number of lawyers in Y specialty."
- Ambitions with no viable means of measurement
 - Example: "Have critical mass and capability in each office."
- Aspirations that lack specificity
 - Example: "Provide exceptional, client-focused service through a diverse team of attorneys."
- Primarily financial drivers that fail to motivate and inspire focus
- Unrealistic, pie-in-the-sky goals that are nearly impossible to achieve
 - Example: "Achieve top public ranking for every practice group."

What makes it even more challenging is that research (see [The Four Disciplines of Execution](#)) shows that if your group has more than three goals, you will be unlikely to achieve more than one or two of them. If you have more than 10 (which many practice group plans have), you will achieve none of them. It is challenging enough to get lawyers to pin down specific goals by which they are willing to be held accountable but then, to get them to narrow the number to three or fewer, may seem next to impossible. Join us for Part 3 in the series where we will walk through how to develop specific goals and get buy-in to a realistic number to ensure success.