Practice Group Success: Don't Just Plan, Implement (Part 3)

By Susan Raridon Lambreth on June 14, 2021

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Can your practice group have a direction without goals? Not likely. As we discussed in Part 2, good performance starts with clear direction. This means SMART goals. But, it's not easy to get a group of lawyers to develop and agree to SMART goals. Yet, without them, however, most practice groups don't accomplish a lot.

In Part 1 of this three-part series, we proposed an approach to help practice groups implement sound practice plans. The components include management feedback, partner participation, and a rigorous market assessment. If you missed Part 1, you can read it here. In Part 2, we covered two more requirements for successfully implementing a practice plan – a proper business plan and SMART goals. Finally, in Part 3, we will address why it is so hard for lawyers to develop SMART goals and how critical these goals are to practice group success.

Why SMART Goals are Critical

Hard (i.e., difficult) goals drive performance more effectively than easy goals. And specific hard goals produce a "higher level of output" than vaguely worded ones."

Source: *A Theory of Goal Setting & Task Performance*, by Edwin Locke & Gary Latham (1990) – considered the "fathers of goal-setting theory

Why is it so important to develop SMART goals?

- SMART goals lead to greater participation. Of course, you can rely on yourself, your practice group professional, the marketing team, and a few good citizens to help you out. But you will achieve more when the entire group is vested in the effort.
- SMART goals lead to increased persistence and prolonged effort. This is because they are achievable – neither too ambitious nor too flatly uninspiring. When you are realistic about the time and effort required, it is easier to stay the course.
- SMART goals are proven to lead to greater success. They provide a sense of purpose, directing group members' attention toward relevant and measurable activities.
- SMART goals help us outperform our peers. They guide us toward leveraging strengths and away from time-wasting trivial pursuits.
- SMART goals relieve the Practice Group Leader (PGL) from the "chief nag" role. When practice group partners collectively develop and buy into shared goals, they are motivated to implement them without the PGL's constant haranguing.

Barriers to SMART Goal Success

As great as SMART goals are, it's a challenge to get a group of skeptical lawyers to agree on much of anything, much less a concise set of three goals that will thoroughly engage the practice group over the next year. It requires getting the partners to (1) narrow their focus and (2) establish priorities to which they can be held accountable.

So you want to narrow the frequently competing partner priorities down to the recommended two or three goals that you can actually achieve and keep everyone on task? Lawyers often resist. But, remember from Part 2 – if you have more than 3 goals, your chance of implementing any drops significantly!

Lawyers typically resist because:

- There are few or no incentives to spend the necessary time to achieve them
- We think, consciously or not, that setting easily achievable goals are, well, easier. This appeals to both the low resilience trait that most lawyers exhibit and the need to feel good about our accomplishments.
- It's really hard work to get autonomous partners to identify the right group goals (analysis, choices, taking risks) and work toward them instead of simply building their individual practices.

It's hard for any group of people to narrow their focus to only a few goals. It's not just lawyers. We are wired for diversity and broad-based thinking. And, ambitious people often want to set big audacious goals. So it's understandable why lawyers might struggle with limiting the number of goals. We don't want to risk picking one option over another – we might miss a great opportunity. Better to hedge our bets rather than put all our eggs in one basket.

It's also a monumental task to develop truly measurable goals. We are not in a commodity business. We can't just produce X number of widgets more and call it a day. So goal setting for lawyers requires a bit more thought. For example, how do you measure the "exceptional customer service" you espouse? What does it mean to make "major inroads" into a new practice area?

For your practice group's SMART goals to work, you need to address the barriers. Shine the light on them. If you need to provide incentives, do so. Push to include goals that matter and that require a sufficient amount of effort so that the practice group feels a sense of accomplishment. Individual partners will have their own goals, but all partners need to buy-in to the collective goals, as well. This requires asking tough questions and addressing the concerns.

SMART Goals That Work

In Part 2, we shared numerous examples of "non-goals" from law firm plans. Here are some examples of real-life law firm SMART goals that are more likely to drive the intended behaviors:

- Be known as one of the top three firms in the technology industry nationally (only where this can be proven)
- Attract three new life sciences clients over $250,000 each
- Increase Chambers ranking to tier 1
- Increase the market share of business in the telecommunications industry by 50%
- Attract three new matters over $500K in revenues from manufacturing companies
- Attract over 30% of the major health care companies in our region
- Increase our work in IP litigation for Fortune 1000 companies by 200%
- Attract five significant new product liability clients (over $1 million each in annual revenues)

- Obtain Tier 2 Chambers ranking for real estate work in each of our major markets

These can be SMART goals for a practice group if they are:

- Realistic: Your mileage may vary. What is realistic for one firm might not be for another.
- Measurable: You need benchmark data and target data.
- Group-oriented: This means everyone's included. If the goal can be accomplished by one or two of your top rainmakers without significant contributions from other group members, they are not SMART goals for the group.

After the group has completed the steps described in Part 1 of this series – particularly the market assessment – the hard work of developing SMART goals begins. Be sure that your market assessment includes plenty of competitive intelligence and strategic communication to group members. If the market assessment is done well, there should be a sense of anticipation and urgency to move forward that motivates partners to participate in developing shared goals. Now you have the momentum to develop the right kind — and right amount — of hard goals.