

The Practice Group Leader as Change Agent, Part 2

By [Susan Raridon Lambreth](#) on November 23, 2020

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If Practice Group Leaders were important before, they are even more critical during this period of intense change. They are, in fact, change agents, the leaders who will help propel the most progressive firms forward to face the challenges of the future. With so many shifts in the competitive landscape and a great deal of uncertainty, practice groups demand leadership like never before. The spotlight is on PGLs. It's their time to shine.

But what does it mean to be a change agent? How can PGLs prepare for the role?

In Part 1, we described the first four common characteristics of change agents as listed below. If you missed the article, [you can read it here](#). In this article, we will continue describing the last five characteristics. The characteristics include:

- Clear vision
- Targeted planning and focus
- Ability to inspire
- Ability to experiment
- **Role modeling/leading by example**
- **Building trust relationships**
- **Patience and persistence**
- **Resilience**
- **Servant-leader mindset**

Moreover, we offer experience-based advice on how you can implement or work on each one to give your PGLs the greatest chance of success.

Role Modeling and Leading by Example

PGLs cannot get others to change or do things if they are not role modeling appropriate behaviors. This means that when PGLs ignore policies regarding discounting, prompt billing or daily time entry, for example, they undermine change efforts. PGLs need to commit significant amounts of investment time (quality non-billable time) to build the group. They also must insist that other group members spend investment time in the same way. This is, of course, in addition to personal practice building.

Practice group success today requires many members of the group to invest time in client relationship management, mentoring and supervision, legal project management, business development, professional development, knowledge management and more. It seems a tall order, but when PGLs step outside of their comfort zone to do these things, they demonstrate to others that these activities are achievable, realistic and essential. In addition, role modeling matters psychologically. Humans are hard-wired to follow leaders. When leaders walk their talk, others will follow; and when

leaders don't walk their talk, others will follow even still.

Building Trust Relationships

Trust relationships are critical to getting lawyers to buy-in, move the group forward, work collaboratively and more. Without trust, the group will not function as a team but will exist as a confederation of individual practitioners. In addition to being highly skeptical, our data show that lawyers are very low in sociability, which is the inclination to authentically connect with others. It can be difficult for highly skeptical, low sociability lawyers to build trust with their colleagues.

Nevertheless, the PGL needs to learn about the practices and career aspirations for, at least, each partner (and all lawyers in smaller practice groups). This means knowing what type of work they are doing now, what they particularly enjoy or find most challenging and where they would like to take their practice in the next few years. It means knowing the "pain points" or concerns about their practice in the current turbulent market for legal services. The old adage that a person "does not care how much you know until they know how much you care" actually applies here. Showing you understand (and care about) your colleagues' practices, goals, aspirations and needs goes a long way toward building trust with them.

A good, time-tested model for building trust is Stephen Covey's idea of the "Emotional Bank Account." In his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey explained how certain behaviors, like keeping your word, or not talking about others behind their back, act like deposits to a bank account. Opposite behaviors, like constantly disappointing others, or gossiping behind their backs, act like withdrawals. Covey makes the point that one withdrawal can require many deposits to restore the status quo trust level.

Patience and Persistence

When the typical law firm practice group is performing at very high levels and partners are making far more money than they ever expected when they graduated law school, it can seem irrational to raise warning signals. At the same time, any PGL monitoring the market and internal data can see cracks in the seams that, if not addressed, could mean serious issues down the road for the practice group and its members.

Anyone in leadership in a law firm knows that change does not happen quickly. Trying to force it only results in greater skepticism and resistance. PGLs need to find the delicate balance required in pushing partners and others out of their complacency. If you overwhelm them with too much information about competitors, threats to the business and more in order to nudge them along, you can cause your colleagues to feel like they can't handle it. They'll want to stick their heads in the sand.

On the other hand, if all they hear is positive messages about how well the group is doing, it only reinforces their complacency and they will likely not see any need to change. We are reminded of a Chinese proverb:

"To whom the gods wish to destroy, they send forty years of success."

PGLs are often out ahead of group members seeing the market trends and other factors that are critical for continued success. Again, however, they must exercise caution. If PGLs raise issues in a dramatic or dire way, they will be viewed like Chicken Little. Instead, the PGL can be most effective by working competitive intelligence, client quotes and market data into each monthly practice group meeting, circulating articles or blog posts and gradually sharing information that illustrates to group members that business-as-usual is not sustainable. In this way, the case for change appears to build organically, as more and more members of the group adopt the cause.

This takes patience. PGLs, while recognizing the urgent need for change, must also resist the temptation to push too hard,

thereby increasing the number of “scared dogs” in the group and reducing the levels of trust.

Resilience

Research over the past 23 years by one of the authors shows a remarkable finding: Lawyers have the lowest levels of psychological resilience of any professional group. Resilience is a personality trait that refers to how one responds in the face of criticism, rejection or other life setbacks. High resilience people do two things well in the face of adversity:

1. They tolerate life’s bumps in the sense that they “roll with the punches” and don’t let adverse events (criticism, rejection, etc.) knock them off their game; and
2. When they do experience a setback (we all do at some point), they bounce back quicker and more adroitly than low resilience people do.

Dr. Richard’s statistics show that *90% of all lawyers tested score in the bottom half of the resilience scale!* And this finding has remained stable for the past 23 years. Low resilience people react to criticism or rejection defensively. They spend a lot of time providing defensive explanations for their behavior; they may avoid or deflect criticism; they may try to delay any conversation about their shortcomings; and they may counter-attack the person who criticizes or rejects them.

Low resilience is a challenge for most lawyers. But it is a critically important issue for lawyers in leadership roles, like PGLs. We know that leaders naturally get criticized more than others—it comes with the territory. But we also know that when a criticized leader reacts defensively, that leader loses credibility and followership from their constituents. Fortunately, resilience can be learned. Unfortunately, lawyers have a harder time learning to be resilient than do people in other professions.

This is because resilience is sensitive to two other factors, neither of which work in a lawyer’s favor. First, individuals who are optimistic tend to be more resilient. Optimistic is used here not in the colloquial sense of seeing the world through rose-colored glasses, but in the more scientific sense of habitually favoring more positive explanations rather than negative ones when adversity strikes.[2] Second, individuals with strong, ongoing, authentic social connections tend to be higher in resilience in both senses of the word—they tolerate life’s bumps better, and, they bounce back quicker and more effectively when they do hit a bump.

How do lawyers fare on these two resilience-boosters, optimism and strong social connections? Lousy! Our data show that lawyers are high in skepticism and its first cousin, pessimism. They are constantly reinforced in their skeptical thinking, and this takes an ongoing toll on their resilience. As previously mentioned, lawyers are also very low in sociability, or the inclination to make authentic connections with others. Lawyers tend to be uncomfortable with intimacy, initiating authentic connections with others, being emotionally vulnerable, or even talking about relationships in general.

Yet, the scientific evidence is piling up in favor of the critical importance of friendships, authentic connections, and other ongoing forms of emotional connections. Strong social connections have been linked to overall levels of satisfaction with life, work and relationships, not to mention longevity, general health, and a strong immune system. The atypically low levels of interest and skills in the relationship arena possessed by the majority of lawyers continues to hurt them, at the very least by depriving them of a formidable resilience-building factor.

Because of their high skepticism/pessimistic thinking and low sociability, it’s harder for lawyers to maintain high resilience, and harder for them to learn how to build it up. But luckily, it’s not impossible. The experience of one of the authors shows that, with the right coaching, they can readily learn resilience skills. And by doing so, they can make a pronounced and positive impact on their own life experience in visible ways. This is an effort that every PGL should

consider because low-resilience leaders have a difficult time retaining enthusiastic followers, while high-resilience leaders are far better equipped for the role.

Servant-Leader Mindset

Collectively, we have written several books on practice group management. In our research, the most effective PGLs interviewed consistently mention an important characteristic for success: the mindset of a servant-leader. They describe getting a high level of intrinsic motivation by seeing others succeed. This goes beyond themselves and their personal practices. Servant-leaders derive satisfaction from the success of the entire group, as well as individuals within the group. This turns out to be extremely important when it comes to change. After all, there will be lawyers who are very successful in the current law firm model. They will not want to change, even though it is clear that the current business model is not likely sustainable.

It takes someone with the servant-leader mindset to be willing to assume the personal risks to push the group forward despite strong opposition. Servant-leaders see the organization's success as primary and the practice group's success as nearly as important, while placing their own interests aside. A PGL who is seen as self-serving cannot garner trust and other group members will resist changes they perceive as sacrifices or out of their comfort zone. .

Benefits of Being a Change Agent

A PGL that embraces this role as change agent as we have described above not only enjoys the role more and is viewed as more effective, they see other benefits to the firm and their group. These include:

- Long-term viability and profitability of the practice group: A practice group that has achieved a shared vision, strategic goals, and team cohesion is typically able to recognize and capitalize on new market opportunities as well as sustain and grow the business.
- Reduced lawyer attrition and enhanced morale: Lawyers report a more enjoyable workplace, higher morale, and greater cohesion and commitment to the group when PGLs are able to:
 - Create a practice group focused on the future;
 - Engage the members; and
 - Build trust.

Lawyer-leaders serve a critical role as agents of change. Since change is an inevitable part of doing business, your legal practice will be well served to bring your practice group leaders inside any change initiatives you undertake. In practice real-life human beings are wonderfully complex. Admittedly, lawyers exhibit personality traits that may prove challenging. But they are also a creative and intelligent bunch, willing to do what it takes for the overall success of the firm.

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