



# Leadership and Practice Group Management: The Key to a Superior Platform

by **Richard Potter**

 One of the key elements of a superior law firm platform – many believe it to be the most vital of all – is the role of leadership within the firm. However, this critical element of leadership is usually examined only in relation to top management or to the more general issue of how lawyers apply leadership concepts to their individual practices within the firm.

Instead, we need to frame the element of leadership squarely in terms of the Practice Leaders of a firm. How do these business unit managers shape up in their vital role as front line management of a law firm?

Some of the elements examined here are Practice Leader qualifications and training, the extent of autonomy and responsibility given to Practice Leaders, and the support given to Practice Leaders by top management.

## **Why Better Practice Group Management Now?**

After several years of concentrating on “the big picture” of firm-wide strategy, senior management has realized that Managing Partners, simply by pronouncing on the subject, cannot implement the changes that their strategies require. To do that, they need the dynamic co-operation of their business unit managers – the Practice Group Leaders. In addition, they have discovered that corporate clients have become much more sophisticated and have their own ideas as to how improved

practice management can give them better service.

As a result of these converging forces – pressures from top management and from clients – the art of practice leadership has taken on new significance.

## **The Primary Role of Practice Leadership**

When a firm decides to give new emphasis to practice management, the factor which must be given the highest priority is how the firm identifies and motivates its Practice Leaders. Once a firm has accepted that it needs to delegate real authority downward and that it must react positively to clients’ demands for better practice management, it follows that leadership assumes primary importance. The quality of leadership at the level of the Practice Group often determines which practice areas will prosper and which will fail to achieve their potential.

## **Superstars and Rainmakers Need Not Apply**

Practice leadership is about communicating, not about lawyering as such. The most successful leadership platforms are built around interpersonal skills such as the ability to enthuse and motivate others and a capacity to share knowledge and experience. Such a platform is not grounded merely on seniority, rainmaking or professional success as a lawyer. So the first question to be faced by senior management is whether the right people are filling practice

leadership roles.

Many successful firms have found they gain great advantage by using the rainmaker/superstar as the titular head of the Practice Group, while having “real”, day-to-day management exercised by another person who has the requisite administrative skills.

The selection process should be rigorous. It should include assessments of candidates’ emotional quotient and aptitude for administration and, above all, the level of their native interest and enthusiasm for assuming a leadership role. Never, never should a firm appoint a strongly reluctant or “compromise” candidate who needs to be tempted or cajoled into acceptance of a leadership role.

## **The Practice Leader’s Role and Mandate**

On what criteria will the Practice Leader’s performance be measured? This is a key question to be addressed by management at the outset – a time when buy-in by both parties is most effective.

If a Practice Leader is to be given real responsibility, then she/he must be given real powers. A degree of decision-making autonomy is essential to encourage the development of managerial skills. Goals must be articulated clearly and a process of measurement and review instituted. In terms of “best practices”, assessments to agreed goals should be done on a 360° basis, that is, leadership should be assessed by peers and from below, as well as using the conventional

top-down approach.

By far the most important criterion – the one that shapes all others – is the amount of time which is committed to the job. Senior management and each Practice Group Leader should be clear as to the minimum and maximum time he/she is expected to spend on the job. Time spent on leadership must be “equivalent-to-billable-hours” time! If not, only a miracle will rescue a practice management program. It cannot be over-emphasized how very time-consuming is the role of leadership. It cannot be skimmed and cut back, without seeing a direct, negative impact on the morale and effectiveness of the team.

### **Training and Coaching for Leadership**

Newly fledged lawyers are rarely given wide responsibility for a complex or novel piece of work. Why, then, do some firms think that they can throw inexperienced lawyers into the management of challenging administrative questions? Seldom have new candidates for practice management leadership had any previous and significant managerial experience. It is vital, therefore, that younger Practice Group Leaders be given training appropriate to their levels of experience.

Beyond initial training, because new concepts and skills require

repetition, coaching is a key follow-on element of leadership training, especially for younger candidates. By itself, attendance at seminars, internal or external, does not guarantee implementation. And because coaching is an activity, and not a skill that automatically can be exercised by lawyers within the firm, this is an area in which the firm should retain outside expertise.

### **Practice Leaders and General Firm Management**

In the most successful firms, Practice Group Leaders are integrated into overall management, either via representation on the top management body or via their role on a leadership council which meets regularly and has direct access to the executive leadership of the firm. Either method serves to demonstrate to the wider audience of lawyers throughout the firm the strategic importance that the firm places on practice management.

In addition, such a system of integrating practice management allows the firm to reap the benefits of cross-fertilization of ideas and best practices. Without this, practice management can become a sterile, inward-looking exercise for the benefit of the lawyers, instead of an outward-looking, creative process giving tangible benefits to clients.

When a practice management system is upgraded to the next level, clients will experience the result

directly. And that is why better practice management is profoundly powerful. The changes it produces at the client interface produce immediate impact, an impact that often results in a firm taking clients away from its competitors.

But who is the primary agent for change in practice management? Is it the Managing Partner and an Executive Committee? Is it that nebulous entity “the partnership”? Is it the administrative staff? All have a role but, in reality, it is “none of the above”. Wise management knows that of all the players involved, it is the Practice Leaders who will determine the success or failure of practice management. It is on the quality of their practice leadership that the firm’s platform rests.

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