

For Managing Partners: A Questionnaire for Your Practice Leaders

By Eric Seeger

Achieving a full complement of high-functioning Practice Group Leaders remains an elusive goal in many law firms. Most Managing Partners tell us they do not have enough high quality leadership at the practice group level and thus have one or more chronically underperforming practice groups. Frequently we observe that a firm has a few outstanding Practice Group Leaders, one or two poor ones, and the rest somewhere in between.

If it's true (as we think) that law firms compete primarily at the practice group level and that the effectiveness of a firm's practice group leadership is a key indicator of law firm performance and growth, then it is imperative to continue to improve the functioning of your firm's practice group structure and the effectiveness of your practice leaders.

In addition to regular meetings of the Practice Group Leaders where they exchange best practices, check in with administrators and deal with scheduled obligations, we recommend that the firm's Management Committee meet once or twice a year with the full group of practice leaders to take their temperature, answer questions, revisit firm goals, discuss expectations and rewards and orient new practice heads.

The questions listed below can be used to stimulate thinking and frame a useful discussion. (*A formal questionnaire is presented as a supplement.*) Each Practice Group Leader should complete the questionnaire and their tabulated responses will form the basis for a

conversation between firm management and the practice leaders.

QUESTIONS FOR PRACTICE LEADERS

Altman Weil research has indicated that the factor correlating most strongly with overall practice group performance is the amount of time spent by Practice Group Leaders in the role. Although the "right" number of hours will vary among and within firms depending on group size, complexity and other factors, we have found that the most effective practice leaders spent more than 250 hours a year in the role. New practice group leaders should be made to understand that group leadership is a real job that requires significant time and attention.

Some firms ask their practice leaders to record their management time into the firm's time and billing system, with or without descriptive time entries. In our experience, practice leaders who habitually review their actual management hours (especially if accompanied by descriptive time entries) find ways to spend their management time more productively. The hard facts displayed in their time records make it easier to identify both useful and time-wasting activities. The data also provide a basis for sharing and learning across groups.

Ask your Practice Group Leaders these questions about how they spend their time:

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1. How much time is expected of you as a PGL?
 2. How much time do you actually spend per year as PGL?
 3. Are you spending more or less time in the PGL role than a year ago?
 4. Do you faithfully record your management time?

Spending time at the job does not automatically make one an effective Practice Group Leader. The time must be spent productively, on the right things. When we ask practice leaders why they are not more effective, they frequently tell us it's because they are not clear what is expected of them – the job is not well defined. A major part of the job should be executing the group's plan or priorities.

Query them about their understanding of the role:

5. Are your duties as a Practice Group Leader clear to you?
6. Do you receive adequate guidance from firm leadership regarding priorities for your practice group?
7. Do you have the authority you need to carry out your duties?
8. Do you have the resources and assistance needed to carry out your duties?

Some practice leaders fail to dedicate themselves to the job because they perceive a lack of reward for good performance or the absence of a penalty for nonperformance. They may be convinced that, regardless of what they hear from management, what they'll really be

rewarded for is personal production (billable hours and fee receipts).

Explore practice leaders' perception of the performance evaluation process:

9. Do you understand how you will be evaluated and rewarded as a Practice Group Leader?
10. Rate your overall effectiveness as a Practice Group Leader.

To affirm what's working well and generate ideas on how the practice group structure can be improved, ask:

11. What is the greatest strength of our practice group structure now?
12. How might practice group operation and performance be improved?
13. Please provide any additional comments about practice group leadership or practice group effectiveness in our firm.

It's possible these questions could generate more fodder for discussion than you have time to cover in one meeting. You may wish to ask only a few questions at a time or to respond to less controversial topics by memo. If you make a point of having a group discussion like this at least once a year, we think you'll find it pays off year-round in the form of greater role clarity, better use of management time (yours and theirs) and improved focus on the most important priorities firm-wide.

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A formal questionnaire is presented as a supplement to this article.

Practice Group Leader Questionnaire

TO: Practice Group Leaders
FROM: Management Committee

Please answer the following questions. We will discuss the feedback received at a joint meeting of the Management Committee and Practice Group Leaders.

Time Commitment and Timekeeping

1. How much time is expected of you as a Practice Group Leader?

- Too much
- Not enough
- About right
- Not sure

2. Over the course of a year, how much time do you actually spend as Practice Group Leader?

- Too much
- Not enough
- About right
- Not sure
- Not applicable (new PGL)

3. Are you spending more or less time in the Practice Group Leader role than a year ago?

- More time than a year ago
- Less
- About the same
- Not sure
- Not applicable (new PGL)

4. Do you record your management time into the firm's time and billing system?

- Always
- Usually
- Sometimes
- Never
- Not applicable (new PGL)

Responsibilities, Authority and Resources

5. Are your duties as a Practice Group Leader clear to you?

- Yes – very clear
- Yes – mostly clear
- No – unclear

6. Do you receive adequate guidance from firm leadership regarding priorities for your practice group?

Yes

No

Not sure

I do not require guidance from firm leadership

7. Do you feel you have the authority you need to carry out your duties as Practice Group Leader?

Yes

No

Not sure

Not applicable (new PGL)

8. Do you have the resources and assistance, in terms of financial resources and personnel, needed to effectively discharge your duties as Practice Group Leader?

Yes

No

Not sure

Evaluation and Rewards

9. Do you understand how you will be evaluated and rewarded as a Practice Group Leader?

Yes

I think so

No

Overall Effectiveness

10. On a scale of 1 (Highly Ineffective) to 10 (Highly Effective), how would you rate your overall effectiveness as a Practice Group Leader? If lower than 7, explain why you think it is not higher.

Constructive Comments

11. What is the greatest strength of our practice group structure currently?

12. In your opinion, how might practice group performance/operation be improved? What do we have to get right to achieve highly effective practice leadership and high performing practice groups?

13. Please provide any additional comments that will contribute to a constructive discussion about practice group leadership or practice group effectiveness in our firm.

Thank you for your participation.