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Developing Practice Group Chairs into Leaders Lawyers Actually Want to Follow

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Law firm practice groups are typically led by the most respected legal expert or successful rainmaker in the group. But the skills required to be an effective practice group leader (PGL) are different from those needed to be a great lawyer or rainmaker.

Being a PGL whom members of the group actually want to follow requires the leader to possess a mix of leadership competencies and management skills that inspire lawyers to do their best work, remain focused and accountable, and work collaboratively toward the greater good of the practice group and the firm. It also requires the firm to establish a strong PGL structure.

Several Key Qualities of Effective PGLs

1. Possessing acute self-awareness

Before PGLs can successfully lead members of their groups, they must first lead themselves effectively. This requires developing a high degree of self-awareness. Many lawyer leaders who think they are self-aware have blind spots that inhibit their effectiveness. For example, some have become arrogant, dismissive of others, controlling, rigid, and defensive, and others avoid conflict, delay important decisions, or tolerate lack of accountability.

As Gary Rosen, Managing Partner of Becker & Poliakoff, explains: “Especially when it comes to leading lawyers who inherently have distinct personality characteristics, it’s

critical for PGLs to be self-aware. They must clearly understand their own strengths, weaknesses, and tendencies and when they need to enlist complementary skills from others.”

Jennifer Mikulina, Global Trademark Prosecution Practice Group Chair of McDermott Will & Emery, considers a formal self-awareness assessment she took to be one of the most valuable tools in her leadership role — deepening her understanding of herself and how others may perceive her.

2. Exhibiting selfless devotion to the team

One of the biggest challenges for PGLs is to adopt a critical attitude shift toward being willing to get most of their fulfillment from the success of others — a huge divergence from the attitude lawyers typically possess.

“In order to have a PGL whom lawyers actually want to follow, the leader needs to be consistently seen as selflessly devoted to the team. This means making all decisions in the best interests of the team and not promoting the leader’s own agenda or needs,” according to Rosen. “And this applies to all decisions, big and small, from case assignments to who gets supporting roles to how credits are allocated to discounts and rate structures offered and who gets access to the client, among hundreds of other decisions made each year.”

John Iino, Reed Smith’s Chief Diversity Officer, who formerly served as the Global Chair of the firm’s Business & Finance

Department, Chair of the U.S. Corporate & Securities Group, and Managing Partner of the Los Angeles office, expresses it this way: “Bad PGLs are easy to recognize: they are viewed as doing it for themselves and they usurp opportunities. As a leader, it’s critical to create an environment of inclusion, where practice group members do not feel that there is some secret society or inner circle that they need to be a part of in order to succeed.”

Mikulina agrees and puts it simply: “I want my group to trust that I ‘have their back.’”

3. Being approachable

PGLs must be approachable. One way a PGL can get a sense of their approachability is to consider whether and how often members of the group reach out to that leader directly with questions or for other support, and whether group members are comfortable raising issues or admitting mistakes.

Mikulina shares, “I want my team to be comfortable coming to me with problems (and proposed solutions). I want to know about an issue or concern well before it turns into a significant matter. If someone is having trouble or fretting about a situation, they are not going to be an effective member of the team — and if part of the problem is the fear of talking to a leader about the concern, then it will continue to eat away at a team member and impact their work, as well as the group dynamic.”

4. Understanding and demonstrating care for the individual group members

A group member will want to follow a leader who shows that they care about and have an interest in the group member.

Iino explains: “As a PGL, caring about your people is key. Your people want to feel that their leader gets them and has their best interests in mind. That earns the leader loyalty. And when it comes to getting to know and understanding your colleagues, there is no shortcut — you must invest the time. For example, meet with your associates in person for their performance reviews, or, if you are leading a practice group firm-wide, visit other offices to meet your members face-to-face. But not everything has to be so time-consuming. Small gestures can go a long way. For example, I have a rule to never deliver bad news by email. If, as a leader, you have to give less than ideal news to someone, a short in-person meeting or phone call would go a long way to help your colleague understand the reasons for the decision and earn you even more trust and loyalty.”

Help PGLs Develop Critical Skills

Many new PGLs find themselves in roles for which they are entirely unprepared. The fear of appearing incompetent drives most new PGLs to focus on what they know and do best and minimize the “people stuff.” The good news is that the right skills can be learned. If your firm does not currently offer specific PGL training, we strongly recommend doing so in the following areas.

1. Practical “business of law” skills

New PGLs are often not savvy enough in effectively managing and leading a business unit, which is what practice groups are, so helping PGLs master such key areas as finance, budgeting, and profitability is a must.

Some law firms include “business of law” skills training for their PGLs in their annual partnership retreat. But because few PGLs have previously mastered these skills, ideally law firms should offer continued development opportunities to their PGLs as they take on their roles. Another idea is to create a community of PGLs by bringing them together on a quarterly basis to share ideas and get support from their peers.

2. Leadership and management skills

Gene Gilmore, Director of Professional Development at Cooley, is emphatic in his belief that “becoming a great leader is a life-long quest. No matter what led current leaders to be successful, there is always room for growth and improvement, especially when it comes to effective leadership.”

For a leadership development curriculum to be effective, it must include components focused on both leading the self and leading others. Topic examples in the self-leadership category include emotional intelligence; a growth-oriented mindset; visioning; influence and executive presence; active listening; effective story-telling; adapting one’s communication approach to different personality styles; personal accountability; resilience; and self-renewal for peak performance.

Topic examples on effectively leading others can include motivating and engaging others; high-performing team dynamics; understanding and adapting to various personality styles; resolving conflict productively and managing difficult personalities; change management; strategic planning and alignment; setting common goals; getting buy-in and building rapport; leading inclusive meetings; agreeing on performance metrics and accountability; developing cross-cultural competence; and creating a culture of inclusion.

When it comes to management skills training, topic examples are effective delegation

and supervision; how to provide and seek feedback; managing multiple generations; building high-performing teams; and effective decision-making.

To ensure lasting results, these skills should be developed using a combination of training, hands-on application opportunities, and coaching. For example, Gilmore shares that Cooley’s PGL program combines a two-and-a-half-day off-site training, followed by several months of facilitated discussions and peer accountability. Additionally, PGLs can use the firm’s in-house executive coaching service. Gilmore adds, “There really is no substitute for one-on-one coaching based on specific, actionable goals, and we have enjoyed great success with that for PGLs at our firm.”

3. Developing PGLs as diversity and inclusion champions

Progressive law firms are taking proactive steps to develop their PGLs as D&I champions. For example, at Reed Smith, Iino is hard at work integrating the concept of “inclusive leadership” into the firm’s culture.

For PGLs, Reed Smith keeps diversity scorecards, which track the diversity of their group’s recruiting, attrition, and promotion. Practice groups are ranked based on this information and data are shared quarterly with all firm PGLs, members of the Executive Committee, and the senior management team. Having this type of transparency is a major step forward, but Reed Smith takes it even further — the D&I metric is directly tied to the PGL’s compensation.

There are many challenges facing any lawyer who is brave enough to step into a practice group leadership role and guide a group of independently minded professionals toward common goals. But the right skills and attitudes can be learned, and they make the difference between having non-committed, grudging participants in a practice group or lawyers who genuinely want to follow their leader. ■