

How Can We Help Practice Group Leaders to be Successful?

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The role of the Practice Group Leader (PGL) has become extremely demanding and complex. As firms have grown, they have developed additional ways to organize and manage themselves through industry groups, client teams and practice groups. Most firms now use PGs as their primary business units through which revenue is generated and measured, work is performed, quality control is monitored, lawyers are hired, trained and evaluated, and marketing and business development efforts are executed.

Partners serve as PGLs. Depending on the size of the firm, most PGLs are still expected to also maintain an active and profitable practice themselves, in some cases expected to produce as many billable hours as non-leaders. Historically in many firms, PGLs were appointed because they were major rainmakers. Fortunately, most firms now recognize that effective PGLs must have a specific set of leadership and management skills and be provided with knowledge and support if they are to effectively lead the firm to success.

In more detail, the primary responsibilities and areas of oversight for today's effective PGL include:

- Providing leadership, direction, vision
- Practice group planning
- Workload management, utilization and productivity
- Work intake, quality control/risk management
- Financial management, pricing and profitability improvement
- Knowledge management, project management and process improvement
- Client service protocols and policies; relationship and revenue enhancement
- Business development and marketing; new "product" and niche development
- Training and professional development, retention
- Lateral hiring and integration
- Internal communication and collaboration, including inter-office
- Succession planning with senior partners in PG
- Communication and coordination; team-building
- Coaching, motivation and morale
- Administrative policies

One might reasonably ask how any one person – much less someone who hasn't been trained to do this job – can succeed given the breadth and complexity of the responsibility. Let's begin first with the types of skills and traits a leader must have:

- Ability to inspire and motivate
- Align the PG behind the firm's strategy
- Generate buy-in to vision
- Communicate and listen
- Have integrity

In addition, the ground-breaking research done by Daniel Goleman in the 1990s and all the follow-up research indicates that the most important competency for effective leaders is emotional self-awareness. [Goleman has found:](#)

"The most effective leaders are alike in one crucial way: They all have a high degree of what has come to be known as emotional intelligence. It's not that IQ and technical skills are irrelevant. They do matter, but mainly as "threshold capabilities"; that is, they are the entry-level requirements for executive positions. But my research, along with other recent studies, clearly shows that emotional intelligence is the sine qua non of leadership. Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he still won't make a great leader."

Goleman defines the five core components of emotional intelligence as follows:

Self-awareness—knowing one's strengths, weaknesses, drives, values, and impact on others
Self-regulation—controlling or redirecting disruptive impulses and moods
Motivation—relishing achievement for its own sake
Empathy—understanding other people's emotional makeup
Social skill—building rapport with others to move them in desired directions

According to the [Center for Creative Leadership](#), "Higher levels of emotional intelligence are associated with better performance in the following areas:

- Participative management
- Putting people at ease
- Self-awareness
- Balance between personal life and work
- Straightforwardness and composure
- Building and mending relationships
- Doing whatever it takes
- Decisiveness
- Confronting problem employees
- Change management"

Now here's the challenge. According to all of the [personality profiling done by Dr. Larry Richard](#), consultant [Rhonda Muir](#) and others using the Caliper Profile and other assessment tools, lawyers as a whole are weaker than the average person in many of these areas. For example, on the Sociability scale, Richard's research puts lawyers at around 12% compared to 50% for the general public. [Caliper defines Sociability](#) as follows:

"Sociability: The enjoyment of being around people and working with others. Individuals who score high on Sociability are likely to be motivated to interact with others. Low scorers on this attribute could be uninterested in having frequent social interaction."

As Dr. Richard and others point out, several personality tests indicate that lawyers score below the national average in most areas of emotional intelligence, many of which are key to success in leadership. Of particular importance are self-awareness and self-regulation, as defined by Goleman above.

So how can you help Practice Group Leaders succeed in your firm?

9 Steps to Enhance Practice Group Leaders Success

- Put the right leaders into the position by formally assessing partners' personality traits before appointing them PGL.
- Assess the traits of practice group members to put the right teams in place and help members use their strengths and understand their weaknesses to perform successfully as part of a team.

- Provide training in all of the core responsibility areas, e.g., finance, project management, knowledge management, coaching, business planning, business development, performance review, team-building.
- Provide them with their own executive coach who can serve as a sounding board.
- Give them relief from ambitious client/billable goals.
- Schedule quarterly one-on-one meetings/calls with the Managing Partner to share progress, feedback, strategic and operational priority shifts.
- Develop a team-coaching forum for all PGLs to meet at least quarterly to share challenges and success strategies.
- Provide dedicated, professional support via a business manager, a business development manager and a skilled and organized executive assistant (who isn't assigned to 2-5 other partners/lawyers!)
- Reward and recognize PGLs through compensation and public recognition.
- Inculcate an EI culture that lends itself to successful leadership:
 - 360 degree reviews
 - Personality assessments, sharing and application of findings
 - Teamwork

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