

# What makes a good practice group leader?

BY JEROME SHORE  
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In my experience in coaching lawyers, I've run into a number of excellent practice group leaders but I've also discovered it's not a job many lawyers aspire to.

In fact, I've heard firms sometimes bestow the accolade upon lawyers drawing the short straw or the one unavailable to attend the conclave when they choose the practice group leader. In some cases, it's the best or most ambitious lawyer who gets the job but who isn't necessarily a skilled leader. In fact, it's another tough job lawyers learn nothing about in law school.

In an article titled "Making the maestro collaborator in chief" in the May 20, 2007, edition of *The New York Times*, the following jumped out: "When you ask the players of a major orchestra what they want in a conductor, they answer almost as one: a great musician steeped in the heritage and repertory, an interpreter of insight and depth with the technical skill to convey ideas and elicit results."

Interestingly, I got similar thoughts when I asked a number of lawyers in Toronto about the role of the practice group leader. It seems lawyers view the best practice group leaders as collaborators-in-chief.

In terms of some of the key things practice group leaders should be doing, a big priority should be getting good people into the group and then growing them as individuals and team members. I used to work for David Ogilvy, whose advice to leaders was to "surround yourself with the best and the brightest while you separate the passengers without delay."

The latter is usually harder than the former, unfortunately. Once you've got your team in place, start working to understand what makes the members tick and what their needs are. More one-to-one and less group meetings is the way. Manage by walking around. Aaron Platt of Davies Howe Partners notes lawyers "have different styles of practice, learning, and communicating. The most inspiring practice leaders are those that know which situations call for a nuanced approach tailored to the individual and which situations can be handled in a uniform fashion."

At the same time, get people singing from the same song sheet. This gets you the many benefits of cohesion. Not knowing the values and mission of the organization reduces motivation and is confusing. As the practice group leader, take as much time as you need to settle on the values and mission of your group, whether they involve unbounded client satisfaction, always adding value, harvesting diverse thinking, continuous learning or having a culture of work-life balance.

Then sell those principles and use them when you make decisions. People will think you're principled, at least when they agree with you. "Witnessing collaboration that gets better results for clients is among the most

important things a younger lawyer learns from," says Shane Kazushner of Goldman Sloan Nash & Haber LLP.

"None of us is as strong as all of us" is an axiom that characterizes collaboration. The idea of the collaborator-in-chief role is to make it easy for everyone to contribute. That takes regular effort to ensure the practice group leader harvests input from all of the diverse corners. The hard work includes asking the right open-ended questions to stimulate quiet or reluctant

people. Many Type A personalities talk and interrupt so much that they quash others' contributions. As collaborator-in-chief, the practice group leader must create the space that inspires contribution.

Robert Taylor, a partner at Sherrard Kuzz LLP, puts the issue this way: "When I find myself in a leadership role, it is very important to solicit the views of the team on important issues so that they ultimately understand how their input played a role in the decision."

If the purpose of a practice group is to encourage quality work and innovative thinking, the group leader needs to stimulate the sharing of knowledge, the integration of ideas, and the management of effort. Collaboration is key for each of these steps. Sharing knowledge puts more data on the table to discuss, sift through, and analyze, a process that involves taking advantage of experience. Integrating ideas is a catalyst to fuse the bits of different concepts together to create something new. Managing effort gets more of the right stuff done and ensures there are fewer mistakes.

Collaborators-in-chief create virtuous spirals by constantly looking for the right combinations of people and resources. They do this by building the kind of trust that feeds into the desire to contribute and overcomes the fear of rejection, failure, and embarrassment. When collaborators-in-chief are at their best, they create an absence of vulnerability so the whole team will contribute in an unbridled way.

A nettle is a plant that is painful to grasp because it has little stingers on the leaves. Practice group leaders must grasp the nettles to make meetings and teams more effective. The best leaders identify the nettles early and don't let bad situations fester. One source of them is interpersonal factors such as emotions and the cultural differences that become magnified in a stressful environment.

Another cause is the avoidance of decisions. As Adam Wagman, managing partner at Howie Sacks & Henry LLP, points out, "The way to keep things moving is to focus on making decisions rather than pondering alternatives." **LT**

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## Speaker's Corner