

# Hit It Out of the Park: Lessons Learned in Practice Group Management

By Jennifer G. Gallinson

The baseball season is in full swing, and it's a perfect time for law firm leaders to look to the "field of dreams" for leadership lessons. This article reviews a methodology that has transformed our practice group leaders and our firm's approach to practice group management. What follows are some best practices and lessons learned from one midsize firm's year-long endeavor.

## A SPORTS ANALOGY

Baseball teams are organized as follows: You have the Front Office, often with a General Manager who is responsible for big picture items, long-term strategy and player/personnel issues. Next, you have the coaching staff, including the Manager, responsible overall for running the team with the assistance of base coaches, hitting coaches, and pitching coaches.

Law firms, in theory, have similar organizational structures. Most mid-size and large law firms are organized with a management or executive committee and a managing partner or CEO (similar to a GM) at the helm. Next, most firms have practice group leaders or department chairs, who, like a Manager, are in charge of the day to day operations of the various substantive practice areas. In practice, however, unlike a ball club, practice group leaders wear too many hats and try to manage all aspects of the group without delegating to staff or other group members. Many practice

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group leaders are responsible for day-to-day matters such as staffing and hiring, but lack a strategic vision for the group. Finally, it is common for a practice group leader to act completely separate from the Managing Partner, without a clear understanding of the organization's goals and objectives. Ask any baseball fan and they will tell you that without careful coordination and harmony between the GM and the Manager, you won't find a winning team.

At Much Shelist PC, a midsize law firm based in Chicago, we saw a wide disparity in the efficacy of our practice group leaders. Instead of running like separate business units with the overall goal of optimal performance, results and responsibilities varied by group and leader. In June 2014, we launched a Practice Group Leadership Initiative. The goals of the firm were threefold: 1) to more clearly define practice group leaders' roles; 2) to equip them to make better management decisions; and 3) to encourage these leaders to think like "coaches" and act more strategically. Based on this experience, here are five steps you can take to make your practice group leaders more effective:

### 1. LISTEN AND LEARN

Our first step in kicking off the Initiative was to ask for feedback. We looked to each and every practice group leader and asked for the following: What was working? What wasn't working? What drove you crazy about your job? Where did you spend the most time and attention? What could the firm do better to help you? We listened to their concerns and began to build our job description and identify our training objectives. Asking the hard questions and engaging them in the process will re-energize your leaders and gain their buy in for the initiative.

### 2. TAKE BABY STEPS

Throughout the Initiative, we worked with each leader to identify skills and resources that would enable them to improve their role. Some of the obstacles that inhibited their success were easy to

break down and were in effect "low-hanging fruit." One example was information: They identified financial and statistical information that they were missing. We worked with accounting to get specific reports which would empower them to make strategic decisions for their groups. Another example was communication: Practice group leaders identified a desire for more streamlined communication from the top down. We appointed the Chairman of our firm as the liaison between the practice group leaders and the management committee to give them a direct voice to firm management. With each step, you can build an environment of trust among the group, and your leaders know you are invested in their development and in the success of the Initiative.

### 3. DEFINE THEIR ROLE

Using the feedback from the focus groups, we drafted a job description for practice group leaders. This description now details expectations and responsibilities in areas such as communication; strategic planning; recruitment; business development; compensation; client services; financial management; and professional development. By setting goals and defining processes to measure performance, practice group leaders will gain clarity of the firm's expectations and be more willing to collectively work toward the goals of your organization.

### 4. PROVIDE TRAINING

We retained a recognized law firm practice management expert to facilitate a day-long seminar and provide the tools for leadership and professional development. We addressed the following topics: adding value as a practice group leader; how to work with diverse colleagues with conflicting priorities; running effective meetings; conversations with the team; and differentiating your practice group in client service. Practice group leaders left equipped with templates for strategic planning and strategies for goal setting for their group members. The leaders left the program engaged in the

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## Practice Leaders

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Initiative, challenged themselves and each other, and felt fully prepared to do things differently when they went back to their groups.

### 5. HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE

Each practice group leader was required to select one specific goal to immediately take back to their groups after training. They shared this goal with the group and we circulated it afterward and marked a three-week follow-up. Our

Chairman met with each practice group leader one on one to discuss the nuances of their groups and a strategic plan with regard to each. Challenges were discussed at length and firm resources provided. At the next group meeting, another goal was set, and this process continues as we meet every six weeks to monitor progress. Our ultimate goal is to provide discrete metrics for accountability which might include profitability, realization, client retention, business development, recruitment and development.

## CONCLUSION

It is exceedingly difficult work for professionals to manage their peers, but with clarity in their roles and responsibilities, your leaders will have a greater degree of success. With firm support and training, they will be better equipped to organize, motivate and coach their attorneys to serve your clients' interests. They will have the overall enterprise in mind while calling the plays and selecting the best players for the team.

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## Global 100

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lawyers, making it the world's second-largest law firm by that measure. There are now eight Chinese firms in the Global 100 head count rankings, collectively employing more than 13,000 lawyers.)

For Latham, its results were a fitting sendoff for longtime chair Robert Dell, who departed at the beginning of 2015 after 20 years in charge. In addition to its strong top-line growth, the firm's revenue per lawyer jumped 12%, to nearly \$1.25 million, and its profits per partner soared 16.5% to \$2.9 million. Net income rose nearly 21%, to \$1.325 billion: Latham added \$228 million in net income last year, which is more than the entire equity pool of K&L Gates, the world's 27th-largest law firm by revenue. Adjusting for inflation, Latham's total net income is now nearly seven times higher than it was when Dell started as chair in 1994.

William Voge, who succeeded Dell as global chair, describes 2014 as "a dream year" for Latham. Every practice group recorded growth in both hours and revenues, he says, with M&A, private equity, capital markets, intellectual property and securities and antitrust litigation "white hot."

### FIVE ON FIRE

Latham was one of just five firms to achieve annual growth of at least

10% in gross revenue, RPL and PPP last year, alongside Jenner & Block; Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz; and UK-based firms Pinsent Masons and Simmons & Simmons.

Wachtell was among the elite practices to benefit from a buoyant U.S. M&A market in 2014, with an influx of European buyers, record high deal valuations and a deal count nearing 2007's peak. The total value of U.S. M&A surged 56.6% to a record \$1.4 trillion in 2014, nearing 2007's peak, according to data provider Mergermarket. Wachtell's average PPP remains the highest of any Global 100 firm, rising 15.7%, to \$5.5 million. (Only one other Global 100 firm tops \$4 million: Business litigation specialist Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan posted a PPP of \$4.93 million last year, an increase of 9.8%.)

Pinsent Masons, a midmarket firm with particular strength in projects, energy and construction, was actually among the five worst performers by PPP in last year's survey, with a drop of 13.1%, to \$630,000, but rebounded strongly after recent investments started to generate returns. The firm's 18.3% rise in revenue, to \$597.5 million, was the second-highest increase among the Global 100, beaten only by Silicon Valley tech specialist Cooley, which boosted its top line by 19% to \$802 million, and climbed eight places on the gross revenue charts, to No. 45. (Cooley

also achieved double-digit growth in PPP, which rose 10.9% to \$1.735 million.)

Pinsent Masons managing partner John Cleland says his firm is starting to "reap the rewards" of its 2012 merger with Scottish firm McGrigors, its opening of offices in Paris, Munich and Istanbul, and a series of lateral hires in Asia and the Middle East. Pinsent Masons earlier this year launched in Australia with the opening of two infrastructure-focused offices, in Melbourne and Sydney.

Jenner & Block had fallen out of the Global 100 last year, but returns to the rankings as the highest-placed new entrant, thanks to much improved financial results. The 400-lawyer firm's gross revenue increased 14.1%, to \$408 million, enough for it to place 91st in this year's survey. Jenner's average PPP rose even more steeply, 30% to \$1.615 million, while its revenue per lawyer increased 23% to \$1.015 million. The gains were in part due to its work for General Motors Corp., investigating the automaker's ignition-switch problem, which was led by Jenner chairman Anton Valukas. GM is a long-standing client of the firm, which handled GM's Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2009 and its initial public offering the following year. Jenner & Block recently opened an office in London to meet the increasing international needs of its clients.

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