

# Effective Management Strategies for Practice Group Leaders

TINA LOFTHOUSE



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## NORTH AMERICA OFFICE

Ark Group USA  
4408 N. Rockwood  
Suite 150  
Peoria IL 61615  
Tel +1 773 529 5750  
Fax +1 773 529 5760  
info@ark-groupusa.com

## UK/EUROPE OFFICE

Ark Group Ltd  
266/276 Upper Richmond Road  
London SW15 6TQ  
United Kingdom  
Tel +44 (0)20 8785 2700  
Fax +44 (0)20 8785 9373  
info@ark-group.com

## ASIA/PACIFIC OFFICE

Ark Group Australia Pty Ltd  
Main Level, 83 Walker Street  
North Sydney NSW  
Australia 2060  
Tel +61 1300 550 662  
Fax +61 1300 550 663  
aga@arkgroupasia.com

---

Commissioning editor  
Anna Shaw  
ashaw@ark-group.com

Head of editorial  
Kate Clifton  
kclifton@ark-group.com

Head of production  
Danielle Filardi  
dfilardi@ark-group.com

US marketing enquiries  
Daniel Smallwood  
dsmallwood@ark-group.com

UK/Europe marketing enquiries  
Adam Scrimshire  
ascrimshire@ark-group.com

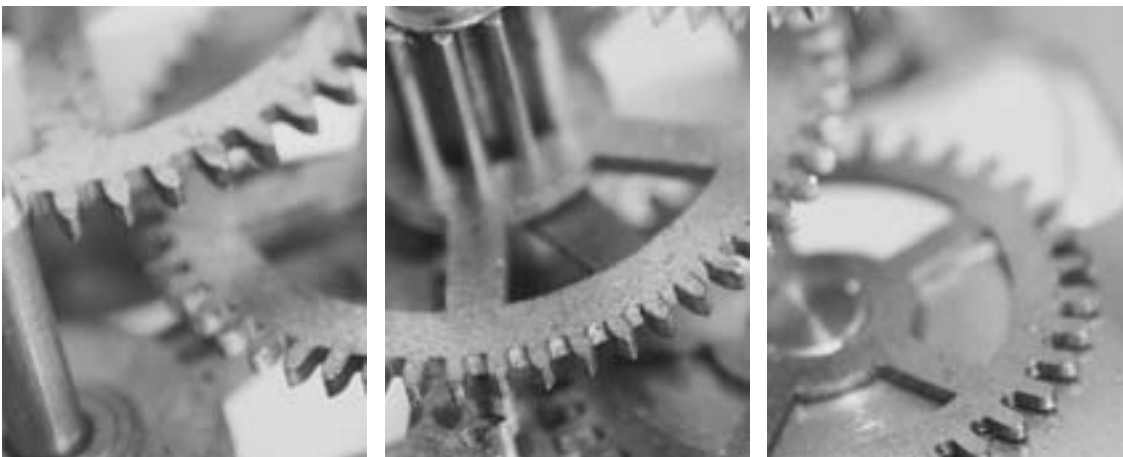
Asia/Pacific marketing enquiries  
Laura Scully  
lscully@arkgroupasia.com

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## Executive summary

FOR MANY law firms, practice groups are central to how they organise themselves. A strong practice group creates critical mass, enabling them to serve clients more efficiently. They are able to pool resources for marketing, share expertise, innovate more effectively, develop more comprehensive training for junior staff, and win business with a more compelling proposition.

Clients take comfort in critical mass, believing that a larger group will be better able to serve their needs. More skills will be on tap should they be required and they are not relying solely on one professional. The well-organised practice group establishes a strong reputation in the marketplace, which, in turn also attracts the best clients and the brightest talents in the profession.

However, this only works if the practice group is, indeed, a strong one, and not merely a band of individuals connected by virtue of practising in the same area. There has to be cohesion and a sense of working towards the same goals. For this to happen, there has to be a respected, and well-supported, leader heading up the team.

Chapter 1 looks at the role of today's practice group leader. Given that many of the qualities that make a good lawyer aren't the same as those that make a good leader, how can you tap into the skills needed for a leadership role? Moreover, many lawyers expect a level of autonomy and independence, meaning that leaders are in the unenviable position of what is often referred to as 'herding cats'.

Some legal management consultants argue that the leader needs to be more of a 'coach'. This can instantly change the perception of the role in the eyes of sometimes cynical lawyers who believe that the very idea of having a leader or manager is akin to having a corporate-style boss. Part I explores this idea, looking at how you can establish credibility with the team, how to get them working towards the same goals, and how to make individuals accountable to the group. We look at what makes team members loyal and committed to achieving the group's objectives.

The coach also needs to be able to assess the abilities of each of the team members so that everyone is playing to his or her strengths. The coach also acts as a mentor, ensuring that people in the group are developing in their careers. A good coach understands what drives individuals in the team, and gives them objectives that they will be motivated to see through to completion.

Good leaders know how to communicate effectively – with senior management, with more junior staff, and with their peers. The report goes on to address some of the common communication mistakes and how to avoid them.

A practice group leader also needs to have financial acumen and good business development skills. It is a tall order and no one individual can be expected to be naturally strong in all these areas. Learning to delegate is key. The option of having co-chair or co-head positions is also reviewed.

Chapter 2 reveals how to get the support you need to operate effectively. This encompasses everything from the training a practice group leader should have, to talent management – attracting and retaining the people you need in order to be able to deliver the group’s strategy.

The report discusses how much authority the practice group leader should have to do his or her job effectively, as well as how to strike a balance between client work and the management function – particularly in firms where billable hours are everything.

We also look at some of the critical success factors that strong groups have in common, as well as some of the challenges of managing geographically-diverse practice groups.

But why does getting it right matter so much? For law firms that do, the rewards can be great. We look at the value a strong group can add to the organisation, particularly in a challenging marketplace. However, despite firm management recognising the value of practice groups, often they are not properly supported, nor is the leader given the necessary time to perform all the tasks the role requires.

Many groups are falling far short of what they could achieve. Over 40 per cent of groups report having no business plan, and over 60 per cent have no group marketing plan, according to the Law Firm Practice Group Management Survey released by ALM Research and Altman Weil, Inc in 2007.

Chapter 3 looks at why the fundamentals are being ignored. If one of the major drivers for having practice groups is to better attract business and market more effectively, why are practice groups paying so little heed to these areas? The report looks at business development, how to market the practice group effectively and how to differentiate your group.

The current economic climate is also considered, in terms of what practice group leaders need to be doing to steer their teams through tough times and how to plan ahead in an uncertain market.

Chapter 4 is an in-depth examination by Patrick J. McKenna of the practicalities of managing and implementing change in law firms. He outlines the steps that need to be taken to ensure that every member of a practice group understands the need for change and will support any change initiative.

Part II features commentary from practice group leaders themselves about the strategies they employ to lead their teams to success. Also included are insights from leading management consultants on topics such as developing a practice group and building relationships. Diversity is high on the agenda for law firms and a case study explains how diversity can be increased at the practice group level. In addition, law firm managing partners outline what they want and expect from their practice group leaders.