What Does A Practice Group Leader Actually Do?

Now this could be seen as a pretty strange question for one to ask . . . if it weren't for the fact that so few law firms seem to have effectively answered this question.

Twice a year I have the privilege of conducting a one-day master class for new practice group leaders, usually held at the University of Chicago and hosted by the Ark Group. Over the years I have now conducted about a dozen of these sessions and in all cases the participants comprise firms of over 100 attorneys in size including the likes of Jones Day, Kirkland & Ellis, Morgan Lewis, Sidley Austin, Weil Gotshal, Winston & Strawn and so forth. Amongst a number of opening questions I pose to the entire group at the beginning of the day, is to inquire how many of them have a formal, written job description. At my last master class this past June, out of a group of 26 participants, ONLY three hands went up – which is pretty typical of the responses I obtain. What I didn't ask, of those who had responded in the affirmative, is to tell us specifically what their job description entails. I've since learned that that would have made for the perfect follow on inquiry.

Concurrently, I was engaged by a firm to help them launch and develop a strategic plan for a brand new practice group as well as help kick-start another particular group that has apparently not been firing on all cylinders. In my preparatory briefing with the managing partner, I asked (among a number of other questions) the usual one about formal job descriptions. I was informed that indeed written job descriptions had just been developed, arising out of a session with all of the practice leaders the month before. I learned that this job description was formulated during an exercise conducted by some consultant in attempting to determine what tasks and activities these practice leaders should be held responsible for executing. I was assured that I would be sent a copy.

Later that day I received the promised draft job description . . . all four pages of it. Entitled, Practice Group Leader Position Responsibilities, this document covered EVERYTHING – from developing an annual budget to approving marketing expenditures and signing-off on quarterly WIP reports; from coordinating file distribution to workload management; and from circulating draft agendas in advance of meetings to coordinating the performance reviews of students and associates. It included everything . . . EXCEPT anything to do with the activities involved in actually leading a team!!! This was the most exacting laundry list of ***administrative minutiae*** I have ever read through.

My response to the managing partner: I will be surprised (almost alarmed) if you don't hear from some of the practice group leaders, after having reviewed this job description, that it is a touch "overwhelming." I personally think that the practice leader's job description should be evolutionary such that you begin by identifying a few 'mission critical' tasks that you will absolutely hold people accountable for achieving and then slowly progress to adding more responsibilities.

This particular managing partner had no idea what I meant by "a few mission critical tasks" and so I set out for him the following:

I would, if I were drafting this job description, start with what I believe should be your two (and only two) mission critical objectives (which are the highest value use of the leader's time and curiously are not addressed, in any sense, anywhere in the draft job descriptions that you sent me):

• Mission Critical Objective Number One:

You job as the practice group leader is to invest time in getting to really know the individual members of your team; getting conversant with their strengths and career aspirations; and coaching and helping (one-on-one) each individual member become even more successful then they would have been, had you not been the practice group leader.

• Mission Critical Objective Number Two:

Your job as the practice group leader is to work with your group, as a team, to identify and implement specific joint action projects intended to increase the group's overall morale; enhance the visibility of the group in their competitive arena; improve the service and value delivered to clients; secure better business; and work towards developing a dominant positon in some nich area in your marketplace(s).

From that as my start, I would then include perhaps one page of only the key, essential items that have been documented over the 4-page attachment, as simply supplemental action points to accomplishing these two mission critical objectives.

And, on that note, I would respectfully delete any reference to 'Financial Management' for two reasons: I believe that these activities lead practice group leaders into unconsciously behaving like policeman rather than coaches; and I think that much of this should be in the job description of the office managing partner or executive director. And in the case of your office managing partners, consider: what is that individual's responsibilities? And how do they interface with the practice leaders?

The above represents my latest column for Slaw.ca Slaw identifies itself as "a cooperative weblog on all things legal." Slaw has been publishing for five years and gets 30,000 unique visitors and about 100,000 visits every month. For the past two consecutive years it has been the winner of three different awards as the best legal blog. I'm honored to have been asked to become a regular columnist and invite you to comment on my latest meandering.