Whenever I've been called in to work with a firm's practice group, some group that needs remedial attention, one of my first questions of firm leadership is to please send me copies of the groups' meeting *minutes*. The response I usually elicit is . . . *"Minutes? What do you mean by minutes?"* Which tells me everything I need to know!

I find that too many practice group meetings (if your practice groups are meeting at all) are simply a convenient excuse to have lunch and find out what everyone has been up to lately. Many groups may spend time talking about workloads and about what's new in their particular area of practice – but few actually engage in collaborating on projects that could advance the group's ambitions.

What I've learned and observed first hand is that the most effective practice groups, the ones that are bringing in good client work and striving to dominate in their chosen markets, actually spend their time ***action planning***, determining some joint projects that the group would benefit from working on and then having partners volunteer to implement certain tasks.

> ***"The most effective practice groups, the ones that are bringing in good client work and striving to dominate in their chosen markets, actually spend their time action planning."***

The acid test is: Are your groups really doing anything meaningful?

The only way for you, as the firm leader, to determine the answer is to get the group's minutes and see whether there are specific tasks and projects identified and underway with specific partners committed to implementing those projects – and ideally those projects should line up with the written, strategic business plan that each group created and submitted to firm management. (and Yes, I'm talking about a real ***"strategic"*** plan, not one of those silly three page templates that the marketing department handed out to each practice group leader to complete at the beginning of January).

As the firm leader if you are receiving the monthly minutes from each of your practice groups, you can fairly easily determine who's being effective and who is off track, who's working on implementing their group's plan and who is not; and which practice leaders you might need to spend some time coaching and which you need only send a "good work' note to. Alternatively, without regular minutes you will not likely find out how any of your groups are progressing until . . . perhaps the end of the year, if then.

Attached is an *excerpt* from a typical, written report that was compiled following a meeting of the partners within a Products Litigation Group:

MINUTES

PRODUCTS LITIGATION GROUP MEETING

January 21, 2014

Joanne – will compile and present a list of the (niche) manufacturing companies that we have represented (both in our group and across the firm) with an indication of who our main contact is and the relationship we have with each contact.

Chris – will provide a report on what other competitive firms are doing in the (niche) manufacturing industry, what specific industry groups are active, and what some of the timely issues are that populate the agendas of these industry groups.

Geoffrey – will conduct some research into a new federal act that is just being introduced and prepare a written summary of the regulatory implication for the group to review.

Allison – is going to research government contacts in the economic development department, visit/interview them to determine their views on selective industry issues and report back to the next meeting.

Brady – will review our experience and provide a summary on how we have been performing in doing this work using alternative fee arrangements.

Andrew – will work on developing the first draft of a specific template for conducting a litigation post mortem.

This is typical of the type of written report that, if I were the Managing Partner, I would want to receive every month from each and every one of my Practice Group Leaders.

The report is simply one page, listing each "core" member of the practice group by name, with a specific project (or not) that that individual had volunteered to complete by the next monthly meeting date.

At a glance, I can then see what is going on in each of the practice groups and who is working on what.

I can also begin to identify if the same project appears each month next to the same partner's name - which may indicate that that partner isn't following through on whatever task they promised the group they would execute.

I can also see whether certain partners aren't attending meetings or contributing.

I can see whether the projects that are getting implemented are in concert with the practice group's written strategic plan or simply 'make busy' work that isn't really advancing the group's ambitions.

And finally, I can distribute each practice group's one-page action planning summary to any other group's where there is any areas of potential overlap – and also post all of the reports online so that any practice group leader (or any partner) may review what other groups are working on.

Sounds simple? And it actually is. It requires that firm leadership set out some expectations of what practice groups need to be doing and then hold the practice leaders accountable. One of those expectations involves every practice group having action planning meetings that focus in on specific tasks and projects that advance the group's strategy – rather than convenient excuses to have lunch and chat about what's been going on.

So, are you getting the minutes from your practice group's meetings and do you know what each practice group is actually doing?

Related Articles on patrickmckenna.com

- *Practice Group Leadership 2.0*
- *When Needing To Replace A Practice Leader*