

## Getting Partner Performance on Track

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At a recent summit meeting of U.S. practice group leaders in a global firm, I had the opportunity to run a leadership self-assessment ([The Leadership Practices Inventory](#)) and then ask the leaders to apply their insights to partner under-performance. The “takeaways” from this session may help any practice group leader who is charged with turning around under-performing partners.

Among the scenarios they tackled were:

**Harry** – a 60-year-old partner whose significant clients were providing 20% less business than before; yet Harry did not want to transition the clients to others or cross-sell potential work, even though his compensation had been suffering.

**Andrea** – aged 52, was running a practice that had become a commodity practice, and she tried to just work harder to maintain billings. That strategy was going to hit a wall but she seemed unable to go out and seek higher-priced work. In time, the firm might need to let the practice go altogether.

**Mark** – an aggressive partner in his early 40s with very high hours and strong numbers. But his style was driving associates out of the firm, and his demands were even affecting junior in-house counsel at his clients. He could not keep an assistant longer than three months.

For each of these partners, the leaders recognized that the issues could not be ignored; the consequences of doing nothing would create a ripple effect. Secondly, they recognized that they would need to apply the skills of a “difficult conversation” as well as effective leadership practices.

These were some of the practice group leaders’ insights:

- articulate a vision for the future of the practice group and demonstrate the value of all partners buying into the vision; this sets the stage for individual conversations (Harry, Andrea)
- listen to the partner’s side of the story before stating your observation (all three)
- ask the partner to do some problem-solving with a respected partner who is a model of positive performance for the same challenge (Harry, Mark)

- enable a “stuck” partner to move forward by offering options and support for new ways of practicing (Andrea, Mark)
- use the appeal of “legacy” for more senior partners; they may take pride in their clients growing with the firm (Harry)
- reinforce and celebrate small wins after the difficult conversation (all three)
- seek concrete individual plans from the partner, with measurable goals and a specific time frame (all three), and
- ask the partner to take ownership of the plan and the solutions; the leader should not be the micro-manager and half owner.

In a facilitated workshop session, these practice leaders generated smart, actionable ideas in about 30 minutes. They also highlighted today’s reality – that partner under-performance, however it appears, cannot be left to some default answer. Yet effective leaders can learn to meet the challenge with well-planned conversations.