

How I Made It **Legal Practice Management**

## How I Made Practice Group Chair: 'Effective Leadership Requires More Than Just Legal Skill,' Says Tom Cockriel of Trenam Law

"Effective leadership requires more than just legal skill. You need deep subject-matter knowledge, strong business development instincts, and the ability to build and motivate a team. Financial management, operational awareness, and communication across the firm are essential. Equally important is adaptability—anticipating where the market is going and guiding your team to meet those evolving client needs."

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Thomas J. Cockriel of Trenam Law. Courtesy photo.

**Thomas Cockriel**, 37, Shareholder at Trenam Law, Tampa, Florida

**Practice area:** Business transactions (M&A and corporate)

**Law school and year of graduation:** University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School, 2013

*The following has been edited for style.*

**How many years have you been at your firm?**

I have been at the firm for 8+ years.

### **What made you pick your practice area?**

From early in my career, I was drawn to the intersection of business, technology, and solution-oriented deal-making—understanding how companies grow, transact, protect their intellectual property, and manage growth and change. Business transactions offered a way to be both counselor and strategist: helping clients close deals while achieving their goals. Working in this area allows me to combine my interests in corporate law, technology, and innovation, all while solving real-world problems that shape how companies evolve.

### **How did you develop your expertise in your practice area?**

The University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School and the Wharton School both stress the ideas of being cross-disciplinary, and the law school in particular encourages a collegial approach. That education set the stage. I then worked at a global New York law firm where there was an intense focus on responsiveness, top tier quality work, and client trust and I am grateful for those lessons learned during the late nights and long hours we worked on complex technology transactions. Since joining Trenam, I've made a concerted effort to build depth across industries and transaction structures while also publishing articles on relevant topics to educate practitioners and clients.

### **Why did you want to become a practice area leader?**

Becoming a practice group leader was an opportunity to expand my impact. I wanted to help guide how our team serves clients, develop future leaders, and ensure our group remains ahead of the curve as legal technology impacts our practice. Leadership also allows me to mentor, facilitate collaboration, and ensure our work consistently aligns with client goals and the Firm's broader vision.

### **What skill sets do you need to be an effective practice group leader (i.e., knowing more about the practice, hiring, business development, financial management, etc.)?**

Effective leadership requires more than just legal skill. You need deep subject-matter knowledge, strong business development instincts, and the ability to build and motivate a team. Financial management, operational awareness, and communication across the firm are essential. Equally important is adaptability—anticipating where the market is going and guiding your team to meet those evolving client needs. I am constantly reading (printed!) books and seeking insight, whether it's the latest Adam Grant book on thinking, a classic Stephen Covey, or Ryan Holiday's writings, there are many places to find these types of insight.

## **How do you balance client work with management work?**

It's a constant balance. I set aside dedicated time for group management, personal improvement, and business development, just as I do for client work. I work to put myself in the other person's shoes and try to understand why they are doing what they are doing. Delegation and trust are key—I involve associates and partners meaningfully so that I can stay engaged in client matters while still giving attention to strategy, mentoring and operations. It's important to focus on discipline, prioritization and surrounding yourself with a strong team.

## **How does having a practice leadership role give you a sense of the broader strategic vision of the firm?**

The role connects me directly to the firm's long-term strategy. As a group leader, I see how our practice integrates with others, how our services align with market demand, where we need to invest, and our other group leaders provide insight on how we may need to adjust. I participate in decisions around hiring, resource allocation, and client initiatives, which gives me a holistic view of how Trenam positions itself in the marketplace. Our group has doubled in size and nearly tripled in revenue since I joined it and it's rewarding to see how the success of one practice group strengthens the firm as a whole.

## **What other roles or experiences help you in this current role?**

Many of the qualities that shape how I lead today come from influences outside of the legal profession.

My mother worked in tax analysis, and her meticulous, detail-driven approach taught me the importance of precision and discipline. She never let us go to sleep without finishing our homework. That perspective and dedication serves me daily.

My father was a salesman who built his success on understanding people and offering practical, solution-oriented advice. From him, I learned that listening carefully and focusing on what truly matters to others is the key to lasting relationships—whether with clients or colleagues.

And my wife and her family operate a multi-generation family business, which has given me a firsthand appreciation for the challenges and opportunities business owners face—balancing growth, stewardship, and legacy. It's deepened my ability to see issues from the client's perspective and to tailor advice that aligns with their broader goals.

I would be remiss without mentioning the importance of mentors, of which I have been fortunate to have several in law, business and government. Their perspective, motivation and generosity made it possible for me to be where I am today.

## **What are key priorities for your practice area?**

Dedication to client service and responsiveness. We strive to understand each client's business, industry, and strategic goals so that our advice is not only legally precise but also commercially effective. Our objective is to be trusted advisers who deliver solutions that move our clients forward.

Equally important is our associate attorney development. We are committed to providing our associates with substantive opportunities—meaningful client interaction, responsibility on transactions, and mentoring on both legal expertise and business judgment. Investing in their growth ensures the long-term strength of our team and the quality of service for our clients.

Finally, we recognize and embrace the ongoing evolution of the legal profession. Technology, data, and new modes of collaboration are reshaping how we deliver legal services. Our focus is on integrating these advancements thoughtfully with the goal of enhancing efficiency, insight, and the overall client experience.

## **Do you have a broader influence in this role over improving diversity at your firm? If yes, how so?**

Yes. Leadership provides a real opportunity to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in tangible ways. I work with our recruiting and mentoring teams to ensure we attract and support lawyers from a wide range of backgrounds. Within our group, I focus on creating an environment where every voice is valued and everyone has a path to meaningful work and advancement.

## **Is succession planning a part of your role as a practice group leader, and if yes, how so?**

Absolutely. Succession planning is essential to sustaining client relationships and ensuring the group's long-term success. I focus on identifying and developing future leaders, giving them visibility and client responsibility early, and sharing in client origination to align and encourage future success. I also encourage knowledge sharing and mentorship so that institutional experience is passed along. The goal is to build a practice that continues to thrive for years to come and after me.

## **Is there anything that surprised you about the role?**

I was surprised by how broad the role really can be. It touches every part of firm life—finance, marketing, staffing, operations, and client service. I've also been struck by how collaborative it is; leading effectively requires constant coordination with other practice groups and non-attorney departments as well. Most of all, I've been pleasantly surprised by the influence you can have in shaping culture, mentoring people, and driving the firm forward.

## **How has the role given you insights into client needs?**

Leading the group has expanded my understanding of the opportunities and challenges presented to my colleagues and peer firms. Our firm is very collaborative so I previously had a good idea of what my 100+ colleagues were handling but I now have a much better idea of the “macro” trends. Our firm’s practice group leaders work to identify opportunities for our firm and firm management has insight on our peer firms and market trends through outside advisers. This allows me to be “in the weeds” for specific transactions while also having a “birds eye view” for our group.

**Is there any other advice you’d share for those looking to become a practice leader?**

Stay focused on client service and consistency—that drives a lot of your credibility. Have patience with yourself and your team. Learn business and financial tips from your clients and advisers, because leadership is as much about running a business as practicing law. Invest in people and communicate transparently. Think strategically but act practically, and always try to lead with empathy.

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