

How I Made Practice Group Chair: 'Cultivating a Culture of Mutual Trust Is Essential,' Says Gina Piazza of Tarter Krinsky & Drogin

By ALM Staff

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Gina Piazza, 43, Partner at Tarter Krinsky & Drogin, New York, New York

Job Title: Co-chair of Italy practice

Practice area: Italy, international, retail and corporate

Law school and year of graduation: New York Law School, 2005

The following has been edited for style.

How many years have you been at your firm?
13 (as of January 2025)

What made you pick your practice area?

My journey to my current practice area has been one of self-discovery. I began my career as a corporate M&A lawyer, but quickly realized it was not the right fit for me. This led me to Italy, where I immersed myself in the language and culture. After returning to the U.S., I transitioned to real estate law, but the allure of Italy drew me back to the country to further hone my language skills while teaching English. This experience broadened my perspective on international communication and business.

Upon returning to New York, I joined a small boutique firm advising Italian companies. There, I met Giuliano Iannaccone, which

was a turning point in my career. I discovered my true calling by working with Giuliano and the firm's diverse clientele. The blend of legal expertise, cultural understanding, and international business in this field resonated deeply with me.

It was a perfect fit that combined my legal background and passion for all things Italian. This alignment of experiences has led to a fulfilling partnership with Giuliano, which continues today. My practice area chose me as much as I chose it, emerging from a journey of exploration and the pursuit of work that inspires me.

How did you develop your expertise in your practice area?

As with anything you become good at, it takes time and practice. I've worked with Italian clients for 15 years, and I've grown to deeply understand the issues they face in building their businesses in the U.S. My Italian language fluency and cultural acuity have been central to that understanding, along



Gina M. Piazza of Tarter Krinsky & Drogin.

Courtesy photo

with my ability to earn my clients' trust. I've also had the privilege of working with a group of talented attorneys from various practice areas who have helped and guided me in assisting Italian clients as they navigate the complexities of the U.S. legal landscape.

Why did you want to become a practice area leader?

While I didn't explicitly set out to become a practice group leader, I'm fortunate that my firm recognized my contributions over the years and appointed me with the confidence that I could help drive the group's continued growth.

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.)?

More than anything, it's important to be forward-looking. You need to be able to envision and anticipate what's on the horizon that will impact clients and the practice so you can plan for growth, nurture talent, and develop the necessary support system you'll need to remain competitive and top-of-mind. Strong organizational skills and a nuanced understanding of your team's individual and collective strengths are equally important for building effective teams that meet specific needs. Always lead by example and strive to set a positive standard for your team. Never underestimate the value of investing time in training. Your commitment to mentoring and developing others' skills builds the foundation of a strong, supportive team. By dedicating time and effort to their growth, you empower them to contribute effectively and enhance

the overall success of your practice.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, cultivating a culture of mutual trust within your practice is essential. As a leader, you must earn the confidence of every team member while simultaneously placing your trust in them. Your colleagues look to you for guidance, support, and leadership in ways that profoundly influence their professional trajectories and personal lives. By fostering this environment of trust and respect, you create a foundation for sustainable success and meaningful growth, both for your practice and for the individuals within it.

How do you balance client work with management work?

Client work is always the top priority, but it's important to remember that, without a strong team, we cannot effectively attract or serve our clients. Therefore, you must recognize the immense value of investing time in managing, developing, mentoring, and inspiring those you lead. This commitment not only strengthens your team but also enhances the team's ability to deliver exceptional service to our clients.

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

As a practice group leader, I'm incredibly invested in the firm's long-term strategic vision and am well-positioned to help the lawyers and professionals in my group understand that vision and how it will shape our practice.

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

My longstanding tenure with the firm is a significant asset that extends beyond mere

familiarity. Having cultivated relationships across all practice groups, I possess a unique ability to navigate the firm's diverse expertise, enabling me to serve clients holistically and efficiently. This comprehensive network allows me to tap into specialized knowledge and resources, ensuring our clients receive the most comprehensive and tailored legal solutions.

Moreover, my personal journey in finding my legal niche has proven invaluable. The challenges I faced early in my career have instilled in me a deep sense of empathy for lawyers grappling with their own professional uncertainties. This perspective allows me to offer genuine support and guidance to colleagues as they navigate their career paths, fostering a culture of understanding and growth within our firm.

By leveraging my extensive network and drawing from my own experiences, I not only enhance our client service capabilities but also contribute to the professional development and satisfaction of our legal team, ultimately strengthening our firm's cohesion and effectiveness.

What are key priorities for your practice area?

At the core of our practice lies an unwavering commitment to delivering exceptional service—not only to our external clients but also to our internal colleagues. This client-centric approach fosters a culture of responsiveness and professionalism that sets us apart in the legal field.

A prime example of this commitment is our practice-wide standard of acknowledging all emails on the day they are received. While

seemingly simple, this policy underscores our dedication to prompt communication and attentiveness. It demonstrates respect for our clients' time and concerns, establishing a tone of reliability and efficiency.

In the fast-paced legal environment, postponing responses or pushing tasks off can be tempting. However, we believe that such delays, no matter how minor, erode client trust and satisfaction. Consistently prompt communication enhances our brand and reinforces our reputation for excellence. By maintaining these high standards of service, we not only meet but exceed client expectations, fostering long-term relationships and distinguishing ourselves in a competitive market. This approach benefits our clients while contributing to our team's professional growth and the overall success of our firm.

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

As co-practice group leaders, Giuliano and I are committed to embodying the firm's core values, particularly our dedication to diversity and inclusion. Currently, the composition of our Italy practice team reflects a 3:1 ratio of women to men, which contributes to a range of perspectives and experiences. Being part of a broader international practice that includes lawyers from seven different countries showcases the value of cultural diversity. This encourages the firm to seek and nurture talent from various backgrounds, enhancing our global competitiveness. By fostering an environment that values diverse perspectives, we model inclusive leadership that can be replicated across the firm. Our commitment

to diversity makes our practice more attractive to top talent from various backgrounds, helping improve diversity at all levels.

Through these actions and our commitment to diversity and inclusion, we can influence broader firm policies and practices, contributing to a more inclusive environment throughout the organization.

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

At this point, it's not an immediate priority, but as mentioned earlier, it's important to be forward-thinking when it comes to the practice and planning for growth.

Is there anything that surprised you about the role?

There's so much more to it than I anticipated! I've been pleasantly surprised to discover the profound impact of the relationships and rapport I've cultivated throughout my career. These connections with firm leaders and colleagues have proven invaluable in establishing my credibility and effectiveness in this leadership position. This experience underscores the importance of long-term relationship-building and networking within the firm. It's a testament to the fact that every interaction and collaboration can contribute to one's professional

growth and leadership potential, often in unexpected and gratifying ways.

How has the role given you insights into client needs?

As a practice group leader, it's important to take a 360-degree view to any management or administrative issue and ask yourself what's best for the practice, for the firm, and for the team. It's equally important to take a 360-degree view to client needs. What's best for the client and their goals? What are the financial, reputational, and cultural risks for the client? It's a broader, more holistic way of advising.

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

If there's a role you want, it's essential to make your goals known. Cultivating a network of mentors and advocates is invaluable. Have the humility to seek advice from those who have held similar positions or who hold influential roles. Their insights can provide a realistic perspective on your readiness, areas for improvement, and potential obstacles. Remember, career advancement often involves more than just individual performance. It requires strategic relationship-building, a deep understanding of organizational dynamics, and the ability to align your personal goals with the firm's objectives.