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How I Made Practice Group Chair: 'Think of It as Relationship Development, Not Business Development,' Says Andrea Griswold of Skadden

By Law.com Staff
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Andrea Griswold, 45, Partner at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, New York, New York

Job title: Co-head, white collar defense and investigations (Americas)

Practice area: White collar

Law school and year of graduation: New York University School of Law, 2007

The following has been edited for style.

How many years have you been at your firm?

I will have been at the firm for two years in September.

What made you pick your practice area?

The 2008 financial crisis hit the year after I began my law career at another large law firm, gaining the experience of one high-profile white collar matter after another for nearly six years. Every case required learning a new business or product, moved at a fast pace, and involved the DOJ, SEC, state attorneys general, or all three. When I then joined the U.S. Attorney's Office in the Southern District of New York in 2013, I knew I wanted to continue that work by joining the Securities and Commodities Fraud Unit. After 11 years at the U.S. Attorney's Office, I decided to return to private practice to take on new challenges and deepen my experience in white collar defense and enforcement. I knew I wanted to be at a firm that handled complex, multi-layered matters at the highest level. Skadden is widely recognized as having one of the preeminent white collar defense and investigations practices in the world, and the opportunity to join—and eventually help lead—that practice was one I couldn't pass up.



Courtesy photo

Andrea Griswold of Skadden.

How did you develop your expertise in your practice area?

Spending nearly six years defending white collar matters before becoming a federal prosecutor gave me unique perspective. I entered the Southern District of New York already understanding how these cases are defended—and left with firsthand experience investigating and prosecuting them through trial. As Chief of the Securities Fraud Unit and later as Deputy

U.S. Attorney, I was also on the receiving end of dozens of advocacy presentations from top defense counsel representing companies and individuals. That rare combination of experience on both sides of a white collar matter now shapes every aspect of my practice at Skadden. I approach each matter with the ability to anticipate how regulators and prosecutors will think, what moves they are likely to make next, and how best to position clients well ahead of those developments.

Why did you want to become a practice area leader?

As a practice group leader, I have the privilege of shaping our white collar practice at Skadden—from mentoring associates and strategically deploying resources to overseeing complex matters. Most rewarding is the opportunity to help junior attorneys sharpen their skills, build their individual practices and develop the judgment that comes only through hands-on experience.

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.)?

While all of these skills matter, to me, business development is the most important. I think of it as relationship development, not business development. You don't expect a dinner with a prospective client to turn into a matter. You have to consistently deliver excellent work, build trust over time, and maintain credibility and relationships—both with the clients and with government—to earn a seat at the table when important matters arise.

How do you balance client work with management work?

The client work always has to come first, but you have to make time for management responsibilities. I try to look at my calendar for the upcoming week and identify pockets of time to block out for management work. How do I judge if I am successful? If I find myself only being reactive—responding to incoming management requests and not anticipating and planning—then I recalibrate. It's important to be in front of and prepared for issues and opportunities that may come up within the group.

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

I have felt very supported by firm management since before my first day, and feel fortunate that I have earned a leadership role. Skadden is constantly modernizing, while simultaneously retaining what has always defined it—the quality of the outcomes we obtain for our clients. Modernizing takes on different forms, such as expanding geographically where strategic or leaning into AI where appropriate. As a practice leader at Skadden, I have the opportunity to put our vision into practice and play a role in the advancement of the firm.

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

The leadership roles I held at the Southern District of New York have been invaluable in my new position as a practice head and as a mentor. As chief of the Securities Fraud Unit and then Deputy U.S. Attorney, I learned

the importance of giving clear, constructive feedback while demonstrating confidence in an attorney's potential. The best leaders help people improve while making it clear they believe in their success, and that mindset continues to shape how I support my team.

What are key priorities for your practice area?

A key priority is creating opportunities for trials for the practice, because it raises the quality of work across matters. We also prioritize coordination with other practice groups and across offices, because we do better when we know what our colleagues do. And lastly, we always prioritize mentoring associates in our field, just as I was mentored as a young attorney.

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

I'm new to the role, so succession planning is not an immediate concern. More broadly though, succession planning is about ensuring the continued strength of the practice. Are our associates developing appropriately? Are there areas where we need to strengthen subject matter expertise? If our associates want public service experience, how can we support that goal? I'm proud to say that recently, two of our associates have joined SDNY, and another has joined the SEC enforcement division, all with our support.

Is there anything that surprised you about the role?

Practice group leaders can do a better job of understanding what other practice groups do. Understanding the work of other practices, how they develop business and the challenges they face gives me a broader perspective. Matters rarely arrive neatly within one practice area, so those relationships are essential to serving clients and growing the practice.

How has the role given you insights into client needs?

More often than not, clients want lawyers who will collaborate with them to solve the problem in front of them. Clients know their businesses and their stakeholders. They want thoughtful options, practical advice, and a partner in the decision-making process, not just a single prescribed path. Unless of course there is one right or best answer, in which case we should say so.

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

Invest in relationships over the long term, share those relationships with your partners, create opportunities for more junior lawyers, and focus on being someone others want to work with.

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