

How I Made Practice Group Chair: 'Start by Leading From Where You Are,' Says Betty Yang of Gibson Dunn

By ALM Staff

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Betty X. Yang, 41, Partner at Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, Dallas, Texas

Job title: Co-chair of the firm's global trials practice group

Practice area: Trials

Law school and year of graduation: Duke University School of Law, 2009

The following has been edited for style.

How many years have you been at your firm?

I have been at the firm for 12 years (joined May 2013).

What made you pick your practice area?

I fell in love with trial advocacy the very first time I stepped into a mock courtroom in law school. There was something electric about the experience—the strategy, the storytelling, and the human connection required to persuade a group of strangers. I've been chasing that high ever since—seeking out opportunities to advocate for clients when the stakes are highest and when effective advocacy can make all the difference.

How did you develop your expertise in your practice area?

I've been incredibly fortunate to build my career alongside some of the best trial lawyers

in the country. Early on, I immersed myself in their work—watching how they prepared, how they thought through strategy, and how they connected with juries. I treated every deposition, hearing, and trial as a classroom, absorbing everything I could. Over time, I had the privilege of being mentored by these leaders. They didn't just teach me the mechanics of trial work—they modeled judgment, resilience, and the importance of preparation.

But there's also no substitute for experience—trying cases, making decisions in real time, and troubleshooting the surprises that arise in every trial. And, after every trial, I take time to assess what worked, what didn't, and how I can improve.

Why did you want to become a practice area leader?

I became a practice group leader because I wanted to help shape the future of our trial group—both in terms of talent and strategy. My



Courtesy photo

Betty X. Yang of Gibson Dunn & Crutcher

role as a practice group leader gives me the opportunity to identify and mentor our young talent, drive innovation in how we approach trial advocacy, and ensure our group is aligned with the firm's broader goals. I see it as an opportunity to pay forward my mentors' investment in me.

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.)?

To me, being an effective practice group leader is all about helping the members of your practice group achieve their goals. That requires developing deep subject matter expertise, as well as investing the time to stay current on practice area developments. It is also incumbent on practice group leaders to build the infrastructure needed to support a successful practice group, so strategic thinking and organization are critical.

How do you balance client work with management work?

It's a constant balancing act. At the end of the day, my commitment to my clients is paramount. But I am intentional about setting aside time for practice group development because, otherwise, it would be too easy for those responsibilities to be overtaken by client demands. Luckily, I have brilliant co-leaders and a strong team of practice group managers who I trust. By working together as a cohesive unit, we are all able to stay engaged in client matters while also carving out time for leadership responsibilities.

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

My role as a practice group leader gives me insight into how the firm is positioning itself in

the broader legal landscape—in terms of focus areas, client trends, and talent strategy. I am able to think critically about how our trials team can help other practice groups and contribute to the larger whole. For example, if we as a firm are focusing on an emerging practice area or specific industry, I can help connect our trial experience to my partners in those areas to grow the broader firm's strategic vision.

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

My experience as a hiring partner has been foundational to how I lead our trial practice group. In that role, I've had direct access to our newest generations of legal talent—what motivates them, what they value in a firm culture, and how we can position ourselves to attract and retain the best people. It's given me a deep understanding of how talent strategy intersects with practice group success.

Being responsible for hiring also means I've developed a strong sense of how to build balanced teams—teams that reflect a diversity of backgrounds, perspectives, and skill sets. That experience has shaped how I approach succession planning, mentorship, and professional development within the trial practice.

What are key priorities for your practice area?

Our focus is on building a top tier trial practice that will deliver exceptional trial outcomes for Gibson Dunn's clients for years to come. Doing that will require developing the next generation of trial lawyers, staying ahead of litigation trends and technology, and partnering with our clients on trial objectives and strategy. For example, one of our key priorities in the current environment is optimizing the use of AI to bring speed, efficiency, and firepower to our trial teams.

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

Absolutely. One of the most meaningful aspects of being in a leadership position is having the opportunity to amplify underrepresented voices. I consider it both a privilege and responsibility to identify our best and brightest trial talent from every background and ensure they have the support, opportunities, and visibility they need to thrive. I take special pride in helping to develop young lawyers who may not have had prior trial experience, but show the drive, talent, and instincts to excel in this field.

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

Succession planning is a critical part of my role as a practice group leader. Becoming a strong trial lawyer requires talent, drive, and opportunity. It doesn't happen accidentally. The health of our practice group over the long term depends on our efforts to identify emerging leaders, provide them with opportunities to develop their skills, and ensure they're supported in their growth.

Is there anything that surprised you about the role?

The sheer scope and complexity of the work genuinely surprised me. I was fortunate to come up through the ranks under exceptional leaders who built and ran a nationally recognized trial practice. They made it look seamless and effortless—like the group ran itself.

But stepping into this role gave me a whole new perspective. I quickly realized how much

strategic thinking, coordination, and behind-the-scenes effort went into building and sustaining the kind of practice I had benefited from. From managing talent and budgets to aligning with firm-wide goals and anticipating client needs, there's a constant stream of decisions that require both precision and foresight.

It's been humbling to recognize the legacy I've inherited and the responsibility that comes with it. I now have a deeper appreciation for the leaders who came before me—and for the importance of being intentional in how we lead, grow, and evolve the practice.

How has the role given you insights into client needs?

Serving as a practice group leader has given me a broader and more nuanced understanding of client needs beyond just winning cases. In my oversight role, I have the opportunity to see patterns across industries and matters that reveal how clients are thinking about trial as part of their overall business strategy. That perspective has allowed me to help our practice group deliver value consistently to our clients as not just trial lawyers, but strategic advisers.

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

Start by leading from where you are. Take ownership, mentor others, and think beyond your own docket. Leadership is about mindset—being proactive, collaborative, and committed to the success of the team as a whole. And there's no better way to position yourself for a leadership position you want than demonstrating those qualities in the positions that you already occupy.