

How I Made Practice Group Chair: 'Don't Hesitate to Step Up and Embrace the Challenge,' Says Danielle Tully of Cadwalader

By ALM Staff

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Danielle Tully, Partner at Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft, New York, New York

Practice area: Global litigation and intellectual property

Law school and year of graduation: Boston College Law School, 2003

The following has been edited for style.

How many years have you been at your firm?

I have been at the firm for 16 years, soon to be 17.

What made you pick your practice area?

I've always had a fascination with science and the ways it intersects with law. Even as an undergraduate, I knew I was headed for law school and I chose to major in biology because I was genuinely drawn to the sciences. Back then, patent boutiques were seeking law students who had those kinds of degrees. When I started looking at law firms, it was clear that if I wanted to do IP work, in particular patent law, having that technical background was essential. It was the norm, not the exception. My undergraduate training shaped how I think about problems, evidence and innovation and ultimately made patent litigation an ideal fit. I had some encouragement along the way;

mentors and professors saw my drive and interests and supported my path into legal practice over other options, like medicine.

From early on, I understood that my skill set was well-suited to a career blending science, technology and law.

Intellectual property offered a springboard to work on the kinds of cutting-edge matters that fuel my curiosity. Today, that's expanded beyond patents and trademarks into fields like AI and data privacy, reflecting how dynamic the practice has become.

How did you develop your expertise in your practice area?

My expertise in IP developed through a combination of immersion, mentorship and hands-on experience. Starting my career surrounded by patent attorneys gave me a strong foundation; my first firm had a close-knit culture and everyone was deeply focused on the craft of IP. Early exposure to actual litigation, not just research and writing, shaped my skill set



Danielle Tully of Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft.

Courtesy photo

and made me eager to take on more. I was lucky to have partners who believed in putting associates into the courtroom early—they wanted us to build our confidence and practical abilities from day one. That made me comfortable with trial work and with taking strategic risks in real cases.

Over the years, I sought out complex matters that forced me to stretch, including significant patent, copyright and trade secret cases with teams spanning multiple practice areas. Collaboration became a hallmark of my approach; I naturally gravitated toward leaders who valued brainstorming and creative thinking. Later, as I developed in my career, I began to mentor and sponsor junior lawyers, offering them the same kind of exposure I was given. The full-circle approach of being mentored, then mentoring others, has made me a more thoughtful and capable practitioner. Every experience, from early trials to guiding associates now, has fed into the expertise I bring to every matter.

Why did you want to become a practice area leader?

Becoming a leader in my practice area wasn't a direct goal from the start; it evolved organically from the work I was doing and the relationships I was building. Over time, I found myself naturally gravitating toward mentorship roles, supporting younger lawyers and collaborating closely with colleagues across teams. Those informal leadership moments—advocating for associates, driving client strategy, connecting stakeholders—showed me how rewarding it is to help others develop alongside my own career growth. When the opportunity to step into a formal leadership role became available, I understood it as a way to leverage my strengths in team building and collaboration on a larger scale.

For me, leadership is about setting the tone for inclusivity and creativity. It means challenging both myself and the team to keep evolving the practice,

not just by winning cases, but by developing talent and fostering expertise in emerging areas like AI and data protection. The chance to guide a group through strategic decisions and support the next generation felt like the natural next step, allowing me to shape the culture and direction of our practice group in ways that matter for the firm and our clients.

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.)?

A truly effective practice group leader relies on a blend of technical expertise, emotional intelligence and a collaborative mindset. While in-depth knowledge of IP litigation and the broader legal landscape is essential, what elevates a leader is the ability to engage, listen and bring out the best in others. Communication skills are critical both for transparency within the team and for building trust with clients, co-counsel and external experts. Adaptability and strategic thinking also play a major role; every matter is unique and cookie-cutter solutions don't work in complex litigation. I've found that a leader must be comfortable soliciting input and brainstorming, as the best ideas often come from unexpected places.

Business development skills are increasingly important, especially in guiding the practice into emerging areas like AI and data protection. Understanding firm and client priorities enables a leader to make smart financial decisions and resource allocations. And finally, a strong leader champions mentorship: developing junior lawyers, empowering every voice and fostering a culture that prioritizes growth. It's not about hierarchy, but about creating space for everyone to take initiative so the team and practice thrive.

How do you balance client work with management work?

Balancing client work and management responsibilities is at the heart of practice group leadership and it's an ongoing, dynamic challenge. My approach centers on the idea that you must be fully engaged in both roles—serving clients with dedication while also supporting the team's development and managing broader strategic initiatives. The most effective way to achieve this is by building a strong, reliable team. I'm fortunate to have colleagues who make my job easier and who share a commitment to collaboration. Delegation and trust are key: I lean into my team, recognizing that leadership means empowering others and relying on their strengths, rather than trying to shoulder every responsibility alone.

It's important to schedule time thoughtfully, to manage priorities and accept that some days will require greater focus on client matters, while others need investment in mentoring, recruiting, or firm strategy. Staying flexible and keeping lines of communication open ensures that nothing gets shortchanged. Ultimately, balancing these demands is less about perfection and more about consistently showing up for both clients and the team.

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

Serving as a practice group leader offers a direct window into the firm's strategic direction and strengthens your understanding of its vision. In my role, I see firsthand the firm's commitment to growth, particularly in litigation, as we continually work to expand and strengthen our already successful practice group. Leadership allows you to participate in higher-level decision-making conversations, giving greater insight into how resources are allocated and how different teams can align to

achieve firm-wide objectives. While there are limits to what can be shared externally, I can say that this role actively connects me to some of the broader goals of Cadwalader: innovation, strategic thinking and targeted growth in emerging areas like artificial intelligence, data protection and cross-border matters. This visibility helps ensure that my group stays ahead of key trends and that our work advances the overall ambitions of the firm. Practice leadership means thinking about more than your own matters; it's about contributing to the success and future of the firm and the legal industry at large.

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

My involvement in mentorship and sponsorship programs has been instrumental in preparing me for practice group leadership. Early in my career, I thrived as a protégé in our firm's sponsorship program, benefiting from guidance and career-building opportunities. That experience underscored the value of having senior advocates and visible champions as part of professional growth. As my career progressed, I transitioned into mentor roles, investing time in supporting associates, particularly women and diverse lawyers. This commitment shaped my collaborative, team-first approach and helped me cultivate a culture of growth within my group.

Beyond formal mentorship, handling a broad mix of litigation matters, from patent and trade secret cases to high-stakes commercial disputes, exposed me to the dynamics of cross-functional teamwork and strategic coordination. Working as co-counsel alongside other firms and managing complex, multi-stakeholder litigation taught me how to break down silos and build cohesion across different groups. These cumulative experiences gave me the skills and perspective needed to lead effectively.

What are key priorities for your practice area?

Our key priorities center around growth and innovation. In intellectual property and complex litigation, the landscape shifts quickly. Cases involving patents, trademarks and copyrights are now joined by emerging matters in artificial intelligence, data privacy and proprietary algorithms. Staying ahead means constantly evolving our practice: pursuing cases that test new frontiers, building expertise in technologies that barely registered as IP a decade ago and staying current on legal developments. Another major priority is preparing the next generation of lawyers; mentorship and sponsorship are essential to ensure our team is equipped for leadership in all these expanding areas. Inclusion is also critical, making certain that our group isn't male-dominated, but rather welcomes and champions diverse perspectives that strengthen our work and our outcomes. Finally, delivering exceptional client service remains foundational: balancing innovative approaches with efficient, cost-effective solutions so that our clients receive the best results, no matter the type of case.

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

Yes, as a practice group leader, I have a direct and meaningful influence on advancing diversity. I actively participate in Cadwalader's Sponsorship Program, advocating for the development and visibility of diverse lawyers and high-performing women throughout our firm. By mentoring and sponsoring junior attorneys, I am helping to foster an environment where voices that have traditionally been underrepresented in IP and litigation have real opportunities for advancement. In a space that has historically skewed male, I am proud that our group challenges that norm—we are intentionally inclusive and work to ensure that talent rises from

all backgrounds. This extends to work assignments, leadership development and the cultivation of teams where everyone feels supported, heard and empowered to grow. I believe that diversity is not just a moral imperative but a strategic advantage; clients value teams that reflect multiple perspectives and our outcomes are stronger because of it. My role enables me to advocate for and shape diversity initiatives in ways that make a tangible impact within the group and across the firm.

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

Succession planning is a core component of my leadership role. I approach it with intentionality, recognizing that the future health of our practice depends on grooming the next wave of leaders. Having benefited from formative mentoring and sponsorship early in my career, I now prioritize providing similar opportunities to junior lawyers, offering substantive client responsibility, trial exposure and strategic guidance from the outset. My objective is for lawyers in our group to feel empowered and prepared to step into greater roles as their careers advance; visibility, experience and trust are key. Succession planning also involves identifying and supporting high-performing diverse lawyers and women, making sure they have meaningful pathways to leadership. I see myself as a bridge, helping to link the experience of senior practitioners with the development needs of newer attorneys. Creating a culture of mentorship and continuous learning ensures that the group not only maintains its excellence but also continually reinvents itself to meet new challenges.

Is there anything that surprised you about the role?

What surprised me most was the relative ease of transition into formal leadership. Much of the work

(mentoring, team building, strategic thinking) had already been woven into my daily routine before I assumed the title. I expected a steep adjustment period, but because I'd spent years helping to guide our IP practice, supporting colleagues and collaborating across teams, stepping into the broader leadership role felt natural. The biggest challenge has been balancing the increased scope of responsibility (juggling more rigorous management demands without sacrificing client standards) but I've learned that building a strong team foundation makes this much more manageable. Leadership isn't a distinct shift but a magnification of the qualities and practices you've already developed: empathy, adaptability, communication and a commitment to growth. This clarity has allowed me to lead with confidence, knowing that the core priorities remain unchanged, just scaled to a greater level.

How has the role given you insights into client needs?

Taking on leadership deepened my understanding of clients' evolving priorities. Where previously my focus was on delivering "wins" in court, now I see that client success is nuanced. Sometimes it means securing a favorable verdict, but often it involves strategic resolutions, cost-effectiveness, or minimizing business interruption. Clients today want innovative, efficient solutions and they expect their legal teams to keep pace with new technologies and frameworks, including the responsible incorporation of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence. This role has taught me to think more strategically about resourcing cases,

balancing cost with performance and tailoring our approach to each client's unique objectives. Leadership also provides a broad perspective on trends: clients increasingly value diverse legal teams and collaborative thinking, recognizing that it leads to stronger outcomes. It's my responsibility to make sure our group's vision aligns with client needs, so that we remain both proactive and responsive in a rapidly changing legal environment.

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

My advice: don't hesitate to step up and embrace the challenge. Leadership is built on embracing balance, adaptability and the willingness to voice your ideas, especially when you're not sure they'll be accepted. For women and diverse attorneys, balancing career, family and firm expectations can feel daunting, but those experiences also provide unique insights and strengths. Rely on your support system and don't be afraid to ask for help; great leadership is about empowering your team and sharing responsibility.

Take ownership of your contributions—early experiences speaking up and proposing strategies shaped my journey and taught me confidence and preparation open doors. Above all, create space for collaborative thinking, where everyone feels safe contributing. Practice leadership isn't about hierarchy; it's about building a culture where initiative, empathy and growth thrive, both for yourself and for those who will follow. Embrace the imperfection, trust your instincts and remember that strong teams and lasting legacies are built together.