

# Rainmaking and Leadership Are Divorced, and the Firm Is Not Alright

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There is a fundamental disconnect in the way law firms develop and support rainmakers and leaders. We overlook and misunderstand the traits they share and the way their functions must intertwine to support the health and success of any firm. These functions deserve equal investment, respect and status. Yet firms too often design compensation and power structures that prize rainmaking, under value leadership and do not offer replicable ways to develop either. This creates a dynamic where the roles compete instead of collaborating, and where nobody inhabiting them trains properly for the race.

Professionally, we all need to be fed (paid) and nourished (developed and supported). Rainmakers keep us from going hungry while leaders make sure we don't wither on the vine. Rainmaking and leadership combine to form the lifeblood of any firm. Seeing how the underlying skills for both overlap with each other is essential to decreasing friction and optimizing results. Development focused on this intersection of shared leadership and rainmaking traits should be a priority for every firm. It would maximize the number of individuals equipped to succeed in both roles, and it would train all members of the firm to better understand and respect why neither role can succeed without the other. Rainmakers pay for the brick, leaders create the mortar, and firms should develop them together to build a house where everyone can thrive.

## The Root of the Disconnect

The scarcity of firm resources (time, effort and money) amplifies a tension between the urgency to generate profits and the importance of setting strategy and cultivating talent. The purpose of rainmaking is to maximize earnings and keep the business profitable, whereas the objective of leadership is to ensure the firm and its people thrive by reaching their individual and collective maximum potential in service to the firm's overall success. Both purposes work together to support the firm's long-term survival. Yet, in a profit-versus-people mindset, profit tends to win. This outcome is flawed but understandable because the results of rainmaking are more immediate, direct and quantifiable than the impact of leadership, which is longer term, more diffuse and harder to measure. And although there are leader-rainmakers skilled at executing both roles, these lawyers experience system-induced constraints on their ability to do both simultaneously. "Leadership," for purposes of this article, is defined as service-oriented leadership focused on the development of a firm's strategy, culture. At many firms, rainmakers also hold high-status titles with decision-making power (such as managing partner or practice group chair), but it is not always the case that the lawyers serving in these "leadership roles" are performing the core work of service leadership.

At firms, most leader-rainmakers find themselves pulled between developing clients and business (external focus), for which there is higher recognition and remuneration, and concentrating their attention on shaping firmwide strategy and leading people (internal focus), which often are mistreated as lower-status responsibilities. We should move toward a profit and people mindset to maximize best outcomes. When rainmakers and leaders are equally respected and developed by fostering their shared skill set, the firm's talent bench becomes deeper, broader and more agile. This can only be accomplished if firms change their approach to training and development.

A 2020 research study by ALM and The Tilt Institute found that, while 71 percent of Am Law 200 firms offer "leadership training," lawyers rated the efficacy of these programs as only 4 out of 10. (The not-yet-published 2023 update for this study has revealed that, despite a substantial increase in the number of law firms offering leadership training, effectiveness ratings remain low at 4.6 out of 10.) The same study found that the average hours of leadership training are just 3.6 per year at the partner level and 6.4 per year at the associate level. Another 2020 study, conducted by LawVision Group and The Tilt Institute, determined that the greatest obstacle to these programs is buy-in from the lawyers. According to that research, firms have difficulty defining what "leadership" is, and lawyers don't believe these (ill-defined) skills are "teachable." On the rainmaking side, this research also revealed that business development training is limited, focusing mostly on sales (how to pitch cases to clients) and not on developing the foundational skills and emotional self-awareness needed to make rainmaking efforts more successful.

In conducting my own research for this article, I interviewed select senior law firm partners, across a range of firms that varied in size from 25 lawyers to more than 300. They included a co-managing partner, executive committee members and practice group chairs. Some of those interviewed are also major rainmakers. These partners reported having received little or no formal leadership training, that their business development training had been largely ad-hoc (i.e., being invited to client pitches earlier in their careers or receiving informal mentorship by a more senior partner who had taken a personal interest) and that the formal business development training they did receive was mostly about the basics of professional networking. All the partners interviewed observed a discrepancy between the status

of rainmaking roles (higher) and leadership responsibilities (lower) at their firms. None of the partners gave permission to be identified or quoted, which underscores the simultaneous sensitivity and importance of addressing the disparity in treatment of rainmakers and leaders—as well as the well-known gender gap between the two roles (an important topic that is beyond the scope of this article).

Because rainmaking and leadership have different purposes and results, it can be hard to see that outstanding rainmakers and leaders rely on many of the same skills, such as:

- Vision
- Execution
- Conviction
- Curiosity
- Adaptability
- Ability to inspire
- Trustworthiness
- Emotional intelligence (comprised of communication, connection, empathy and self-awareness).

Although born from the same primordial soup, these shared skills and traits are utilized differently in each role. Rainmakers largely focus their energies *externally* to develop clients and income for the firm, while leaders focus their efforts more *internally* to develop talent, culture and strategy within the firm. Law firms operate as though rainmaking and leadership have little in common perhaps *because* the two functions manifest so differently, but this is a significant oversight. It has created a blind spot to the importance of cultivating, measuring and rewarding the vital and synergistic qualities that exceptional leaders and rainmakers do share. As with profit-versus-people, when law firms view external and internal investments as an either/or choice, the external priorities often prevail because they are measurable, shorter term and more urgent to the survival of the firm because they are monetary in nature.

There is no need to approach this tension as a zero-sum game. Instead of an either/or mindset, we can approach the external-internal tension with a both/and mindset. This becomes easier to do once firms recognize that key qualities of rainmakers and leaders offer a two-for-the-price-of-one investment. This vastly increases the opportunity for more effective training and better economic outcomes. Firms can reap the advantage of a single investment that benefits two key roles. Moreover, by shifting the focus of professional development toward the intersection of the shared qualities listed above, training will move away from the more limited and less engaging technical skills (like basic networking and project management) and toward true development that is focused on increasing each lawyer's capacity to become a more effective rainmaker and leader. The sweet spot for this effort is at the intersection of vertical development (capacity building) and horizontal development (technical skill-building). This would deepen, broaden and diversify the firm's current and future bench of rainmakers and leaders. Given the low effectiveness scores for the leadership and rainmaking training currently being offered, a mindset (vertical) and skills (horizontal) reboot is clearly justified.

There also is a long-standing and erroneous belief that talents like rainmaking and leadership cannot be trained. Lawyers speak with reverence about these allegedly "unteachable" skills, as if few are blessed with these attributes and there is not much that can or should be done to develop anyone who isn't. Innate aptitude does provide an advantage, but there is abundant research supporting the conclusion that leadership and rainmaking are not just art—they are also science capable of being decoded and replicated. Without the ability to reproduce the skills both rainmakers and leaders bring to bear, firms will continue to put themselves at the mercy of a few powerbrokers (rainmakers and/or leaders) who need to be replaced by expensive and risky lateral hires when they leave abruptly or retire. If a law firm rewards rainmaking and leadership (through compensation, promotion and by shining a light on the importance of their shared qualities), and a law firm treats the development of these skills as interrelated and equally necessary (so that the rainmaking and leadership paths share high status), the actual training will become engaging and memorable because the results will be personally meaningful and professionally transformative. When these things become true, lawyers will engage and prioritize their individual and collective development. They will also become more committed and loyal to the firm.

Firms cannot operate successfully over the long term without both leaders and rainmakers, so it should be an easy decision to develop both and to give high status to both—because we should want to develop as many potential leaders and rainmakers as possible. Doing this would produce game-changing results that improve profits, performance, retention and a greater sense of belonging. It also would address something else important: the need to recognize and reward these competencies, whether they end up manifesting in rainmaking or leadership roles.

To do so, we first must examine biases that have been fueling the persistent and counter-productive friction between rainmaking and leading. It is time to reevaluate the degree to which we have been valuing profit and the external development of clients (key priorities of rainmaking) more than we value cultivating people and the internal development of the firm's culture and strategy (key priorities of leadership). With increasing burnout across the profession and rising pressure over the "Future of Work" and return-to-office policies,

lawyers—especially the next generation of emerging leaders and rainmakers—have become less willing to grind out long hours without meaningful professional development, connection and support. Reconciling the relationship between rainmaking and leadership reveals important synergies that will grow talent and improve the bottom line.

Figure 1  
Status Quo

<b>RAINMAKING Priorities</b>	<b>LEADERSHIP Priorities</b>
Profit	People
External Investment	Internal Investment

Firms have been treating the underlying foci of rainmaking (profit and external investment) and leadership (people and internal investment) as Either/Or choices. This has led us down the wrong path because the answer is that we need Both profit + external investment And people + internal investment. Of course, these dividing lines are not always so black and white. Enlightened rainmakers understand that the business they generate is most valuable when the firm grooms talented people to perform high-quality work (junior) and guide the vision for its business and culture (senior). Likewise, insightful leaders know it is important to attract, grow and retain talented lawyers who can generate the business needed to make the firm financially successful and that pay for the training and development of the firm’s talent. Overall, firms have not done enough to cultivate awareness that both are equally worthy of investment and status. That failure comes at a cost to both the profit and people sides of the house. What can we do to change this? Move from an Either/Or approach to a Both/And mindset.

Figure 2  
Recommended Shift

<b>FIRM RECOGNIZES AND VALUES</b>
Rainmaking <i>and</i> Leadership
Profit <i>and</i> People
External investment (clients) <i>and</i> Internal investment (firm talent, strategy and culture)

## Moving from Either/Or to Both/And: The Polarity Framework

To address the challenges described above, law firms should incorporate education and training on an important framework called Polarities. This methodology was developed by Barry Johnson, PhD, who has spent the past four decades helping organizations understand and harness the benefits of opposing, but interdependent, values.

A polarity is a pair of opposites (poles) that need each other’s benefits over time to succeed. Profit/People and External focus/Internal focus are well-established organizational polarities. When confronted with a polarity, we perceive a conflict between the two poles (the opposites) and feel compelled to choose, favor or prioritize one over the other. Choosing is something humans are hardwired to do and, quite often, that is the right instinct. In fact, the ability to choose is key to our survival (think fight or flight). However, choosing does not work when confronted with a polarity. This is why we talk about the Both/And strategy when navigating Polarities, because using an Either/Or approach is incomplete and insufficient. If you focus on one pole and neglect the other, the effort eventually will fail.

Johnson developed three questions to identify when a polarity is present:

- 1 Is the difficulty ongoing and persistent?
- 2 Are there two alternatives that are opposites?
- 3 Are the opposites “interdependent” (i.e., over time, do you need the benefits of both)?

If “yes” is the answer to these three questions, it is likely you are facing a polarity. The strategy for leveraging a polarity always is to maximize the benefits of both poles and to minimize their overuses. It is important not to treat polarities as choices. They are unsolvable, indestructible, ongoing and interdependent.

Without access to the Polarity Framework, firms will continue to misdiagnose polarities (like Profit/People and External/Internal priorities) as Either/Or choices. This oversight creates consequences that do not support long-term success.

## The Polarities of Profit/People and External Focus/Internal Focus

It is essential to focus on profit, and it is important to focus on people. A firm’s internal strategy and development are as important to its success as its external outreach and client list. Mapping Profit/People and External/Internal as polarities supports these conclusions. With a

combined and integrated focus on the benefits of both, a firm thrives. When one pole is overused to the neglect of the other, the firm eventually struggles or fails.

Figure 3

**Firm Thrives Through Benefits of Profit and People**

<b>Benefits of focusing on PROFIT</b>	<b>Benefits of focusing on PEOPLE</b>
Accumulates wealth Affords cushion for innovation and risk Creates incentives to generate clients and business	Develops talent broadly and deeply Protects and evolves values and mission Retains valued personnel
<b>Overuses of focusing on PROFIT</b>	<b>Overuses of focusing on PEOPLE</b>
Ignores other talents and contributions Compromises integrity in selection of cases and clients Alienates or loses valuable personnel	Invites financial instability or catastrophe Limits opportunities for high-risk cases Removes incentives to generate business

Figure 4

**Firm Thrives Through Benefits of External and Internal Focus**

<b>Benefits of EXTERNAL focus</b>	<b>Benefits of INTERNAL focus</b>
Generate new business Build strong client relationships Expand firm's reach and brand	Attract and retain talent Foster excellence in performance Build strong internal relationships Preserve integrity of mission
<b>Overuses of EXTERNAL focus</b>	<b>Overuses INTERNAL focus</b>
Treat internal team as expendable Fail to develop internal team's skills Neglect value of internal relationships Sacrifice mission for margin	Lose sight of business objectives Neglect market feedback Fail to market firm externally

The Polarity Framework has considerable appeal because it provides a neutral lens that shows us how to value differences without sacrificing our own preferences. Polarities do not favor one preference (pole) over the other; rather, they encourage us to understand why the benefits of both are needed. When a firm experiences a persistent overuse in one or both poles, its bottom line, culture and talent pool suffer for the reasons defined in the "overuses" quadrants in the figures above.

The human brain is, unfortunately, preconditioned to validate the pole (preference) it favors and to discredit the one it does not. This is because a preferred pole reflects our own value system and our sense of identity (how we want to be seen and known in the world), which, as humans, is our most basic instinct to protect. As I noted in *BOTH: The Legal Profession's Struggle to Leverage Stability and Change*, "[i]t is normal to gravitate toward one pole over the other. But when this preference is strong, we also become invested in seeing ourselves—and being known by others—as embodying only the benefits of that pole. The benefits of our preferred pole become part of our identity, and we form blind spots to the overuses of our preferred pole . . . or ignore important qualities, skills and behaviors that the benefits of our less preferred pole offer."

When faced with a polarity, the goal is to focus our efforts above the horizontal axis. This is where we find the benefits. When we dip below the horizontal axis, we fall into overuse and lose the benefits. Picture it this way: Telling one funny joke at a party will make you a hit, but cracking one-liners all night will leave you standing alone by the end of the evening. You've gone from witty to weird just by sharing too much of a good thing. When this happens, we actually lose the benefits of the quality/identity/value that is most important to us. Overusing the qualities of our preferred pole depletes and thwarts the value we otherwise would be bringing to the system. It also causes us to overlook the importance of what we might be missing in the opposite pole.

Fortunately, the Polarity Framework offers an antidote to the consequences of overuse: they are remedied by adding the benefits of the opposite pole. It never asks us to sacrifice the benefits of our preferred pole; instead, it shows what can be gained by being open-minded and curious enough to invite and practice behaviors that support the benefits of the other pole. Being aware of this relationship makes it possible to navigate conflicting and deeply held beliefs in a way that leads to success instead of friction and failure.

**Testing the Theory**

When we take the shared rainmaker and leader qualities listed above and apply them to the polarities of Profit/People and External focus/Internal focus below, the result is clear: rainmakers and leaders have much in common, and their shared traits are vitally important to the success of the firm.

Figure 5

**Firm Thrives: Profit and People**

<b>Benefits of focusing on PROFIT</b>	<b>Benefits of focusing on PEOPLE</b>
<p><b>Accumulates wealth</b> vision, execution, conviction, ability to inspire, trustworthiness</p>	<p><b>Develops talent broadly and deeply</b> vision, execution, conviction, ability to inspire, emotional intelligence</p> <p><b>Protects and evolves values and mission</b> execution, curiosity, adaptability, conviction</p>
<p><b>Affords cushion for innovation and risk</b> vision, conviction, curiosity, adaptability, ability to inspire</p> <p><b>Creates incentives to generate clients and business</b> vision, curiosity, adaptability, conviction</p>	<p><b>Retains valued personnel</b> vision, execution, emotional intelligence</p>
<b>Overuses of focusing on PROFIT</b>	<b>Overuses of focusing on PEOPLE</b>
<p><b>Ignores other talents and contributions</b> lack of emotional intelligence, lack of curiosity</p> <p><b>Compromises integrity in selection of cases and clients</b> failure to inspire others, lack of emotional intelligence, destroys trustworthiness</p> <p><b>Alienates or loses valuable personnel</b> lack of emotional intelligence, failure to inspire others</p>	<p><b>Invites financial instability or catastrophe</b> failure of vision, inability to adapt, destroys trustworthiness</p> <p><b>Limits opportunities for high-risk cases</b> failure to adapt, failure to inspire others</p> <p><b>Removes incentives to generate business</b> failure of vision</p>

Figure 6

**Firm Thrives; External Focus and Internal Focus**

<b>Benefits of EXTERNAL focus</b>	<b>Benefits of INTERNAL focus</b>
<p><b>Generate new business</b> vision, execution, conviction, curiosity, adaptability, ability to inspire, trustworthiness, emotional intelligence</p> <p><b>Build strong client relationships</b> vision, execution, curiosity, adaptability, ability to inspire, trustworthiness, emotional intelligence</p> <p><b>Expand firm's reach and brand</b> vision, execution, conviction, curiosity, adaptability</p>	<p><b>Attract and retain diversity of talent</b> vision, execution, conviction, curiosity, adaptability, ability to inspire, trustworthiness, emotional intelligence</p> <p><b>Foster excellence in performance</b> vision, execution, conviction, ability to inspire, emotional intelligence</p> <p><b>Build strong internal relationships</b> curiosity, trustworthiness, emotional intelligence</p> <p><b>Preserve integrity of mission</b> vision, conviction, adaptability, trustworthiness</p>
<b>Overuses of EXTERNAL focus</b>	<b>Overuses INTERNAL focus</b>
<p><b>Treat internal team as expendable</b> lack of curiosity, failure to inspire, untrustworthiness, lack of emotional intelligence</p> <p><b>Fail to develop internal team's skills</b> failure to deliver, lack of curiosity, failure to inspire, untrustworthiness</p> <p><b>Neglect value of internal relationships</b> lack of vision, lack of curiosity, failure to inspire, untrustworthiness, lack of emotional intelligence</p> <p><b>Sacrifice mission for margin</b> lack of vision, untrustworthiness, lack of emotional intelligence</p>	<p><b>Lose sight of business objectives</b> failure to deliver, untrustworthiness</p> <p><b>Neglect market feedback</b> lack of curiosity, failure to adapt</p> <p><b>Fail to market firm externally</b> Failure to deliver, failure to adapt</p>

When leaders and rainmakers are performing at their best (in the "Benefits" boxes above the horizontal axis), the shared qualities exist in abundance. But when leaders and rainmakers fall into overuse and hold on too tightly to their preferences, the upsides of those same qualities disappear. In keeping with the rule of polarities, the cure is to add the benefits of the other pole. This is why it is so important for firms to develop and value both.

**The Path to Reconciliation**

A house is only as strong as the foundation upon which it is built. Having made the case for a more unified approach to developing and valuing our rainmakers and leaders, we still face the challenge of how to do this. The fix will be worthwhile and effective.

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- 1 Law firms need to create better incentives for young lawyers to grow into accomplished leaders, not just rainmakers. This means adjusting compensation, evaluation and promotion metrics to clearly and transparently assess lawyer competence and growth on key traits discussed in this article.
- 2 Law firms should provide the kind of individualized support that is necessary to accelerate that growth. This means making a larger-scale investment in high-quality, one-on-one coaching for promising lawyers who are committed to undertaking the effort.
- 3 Law firms would reap a higher return on their talent investment by establishing cohort-based learning, especially in the form of more engaging leadership and rainmaking training programs. To be successful, these programs should focus on the intersection of vertical development (which increases self-awareness, capacity and potential) and horizontal development (which provides high-impact skills). Both axes are needed to initiate and sustain significant growth. A polarities-based program, for example, would provide this.
- 4 Law firms should reevaluate whether their current compensation, voting and other power structures value leadership and rainmaking as co-equal parts of a high-functioning enterprise.

Leadership and rainmaking are deeply connected, and both are essential to the long-term health of law firms and their people. We are a profession whose sole commodity is the intellect, creativity and commitment of the lawyers working in it. It is time to reconcile the relationship between leadership and rainmaking because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. If we can do that, other pieces will start to fall in place and the firm will truly be alright.

## About the Author

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### Betsy A Miller

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**Betsy A. Miller** is a Partner at Cohen Milstein Sellers & Toll and the immediate past Chair of the firm’s Public Client practice, where she has built a reputation for guiding some of the country’s highest profile government investigations and landmark settlements. She serves on the adjunct faculty at Harvard Law School, where she teaches on negotiations, leadership and polarities. Ms. Miller speaks nationally on these topics and is the author of numerous articles on law firm culture, leadership development and change management. In 2023, the ABA appointed Ms. Miller as a Special Advisor to the Commission on Women in the Profession and as co-Chair of the Men in the Mix committee. Connect with Ms. Miller at [bmiller@cohenmilstein.com](mailto:bmiller@cohenmilstein.com) or <https://www.linkedin.com/in/betsy-a-miller/>.