

Rules of the Past vs. Realities of the Future: Developing Leaders in Today's Law Firms



In a world of increasing complexity and constant change, law firm leaders must cultivate a broad range of capabilities. They must not only steer their firms with steadiness but also anticipate what lies beyond the horizon.

Against this backdrop, the question of how to identify, develop, and prepare future leaders has taken on new urgency. Who will lead the firm into the future—and how should succession decisions be approached in ways that strengthen, rather than destabilize, the partnership?

These are among the most challenging and consequential issues confronting law firm leadership today.

Evolving Beyond the Apprenticeship Model

Law firms continue to rely—without exception—on a time-tested model of apprenticeship-based leadership development. Partners ascend organically through the ranks, developing leadership experience through committees, office management, and practice leadership. This approach has served the industry well, and it's unlikely to be overturned in the near future.

However, there is a growing sense that the law firm leadership development model needs to evolve to ensure that the next generation of leaders is equipped to navigate a complex, changing world. This means being more purposeful and bolder than ever before in the approach to leadership development.

To explore how this evolution might take shape, Russell Reynolds Associates engaged in one-on-one conversations with 17 law firm leaders to gather perspectives on the future of leadership and succession in the profession.

Law firm leaders were frank about the monumental challenge of building a leader bench for an uncertain future, and that the rules of the past are unlikely to address the realities of the future. Not one firm we spoke with has yet upended the status quo of organic, apprenticeship-based leader development—but several are making deliberate efforts to enhance it, and all seem to believe that more change is yet to come.

What capabilities do the next generation of law firm leaders need?

Here's what we heard most often in our interviews

Client centrality

Strategic foresight

Talent development

Consensus-building

Navigating change

Resilience

From these discussions, five insights emerged that can help firms strengthen leadership development and succession practices.

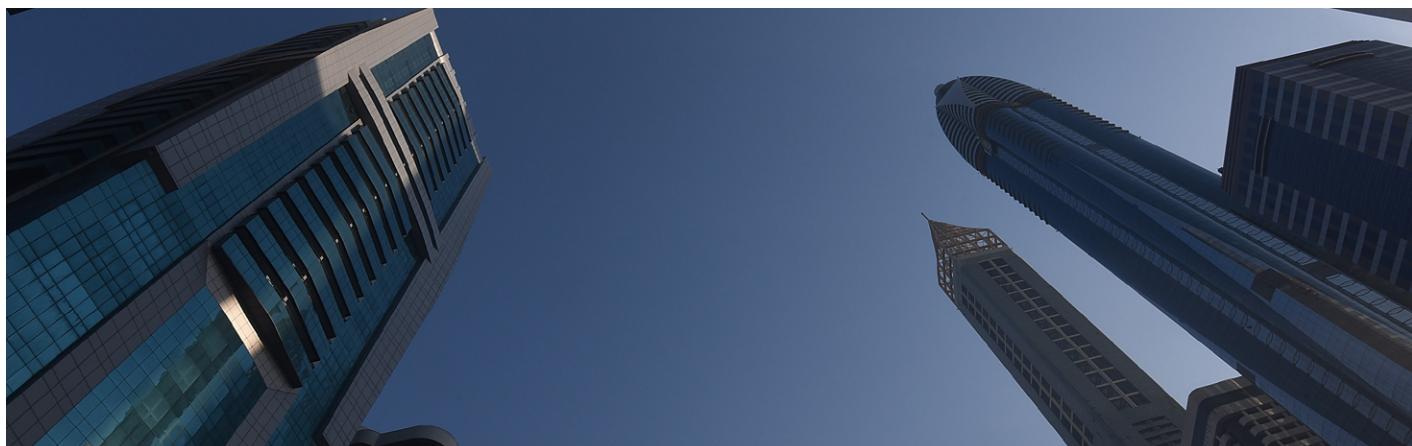
Insight #1	Insight #2	Insight #3	Insight #4	Insight #5
Developing your next leader requires a clear vision of a firm's present and future	Leading in today's complex world demands broader capabilities than those built only through the practice of law	"Organic" leadership development isn't going away - but developing the next generation requires addressing its limitations	Firms are developing both structural and formal ways to enhance how leaders are developed	Purposeful, long-term leadership development isn't a one-time event, but a shift in culture

Insight #1: Developing your next leader requires a clear vision of your firm's present and future

Who should lead a firm into its next era depends on where the firm stands today, where it aspires to be tomorrow, and how far it must travel to bridge that gap.

One managing partner—let's call him Calvin—described how his election followed a major integration. The post-merger context demanded a leader who could focus inward to realign operations, bring diverse personalities together, and emphasize collaboration. However, as the firm prepared for Calvin's successor, the leadership team looked ahead to its next strategic horizon: becoming a bold, growth-oriented firm. This clarity helped them see that the next leader needed to be more outward-facing, market-oriented, and client-centric.

As this story illustrates, a well-defined strategy can clarify the kind of leadership needed to guide the firm into its next era. Equally important is the role of pragmatism and honesty in this process. In a partnership model, achieving strategic clarity is no small task—it requires a candid assessment of not just aspirations, but also past successes and failures. This effort also hinges on deep collaboration, drawing insights from partners, leaders, and stakeholders across the firm.





Insight #2: Leading in today's complex world demands broader capabilities than those built solely through the practice of law

Discussions about leadership criteria in law firms often center around a fundamental question: should the firm's top revenue generators also be its leaders? Every leader we spoke to had passion for the topic, and we heard different points of view. One managing partner insisted: "There is no way, in today's commercial environment for firms, that an MP could be considered credible who has not run a large book of business." Another countered, "The attributes that make someone a successful practitioner do not make you a great leader. You need humility and empathy, and you don't always find those in the most successful practitioners. The job is about inspiration, not instruction." A third offered a powerful metaphor: "The person who is the best leader of the firm is not the exceptional soloist; they are the orchestra conductor."

This debate often creates a false binary. To move beyond it, firms must ask deeper questions:

- What skills enable certain partners to build the largest books of business?
- How do those skills—such as client management, business development, and team leadership—map to what will be required to take the firm forward?
- What other leadership capabilities need to be deliberately cultivated?

To address these questions, one global firm partnered with RRA to design a managing partner succession process anchored in a clear success profile. Partners voted on the attributes that mattered most, and while commercial acumen ranked highly, the majority emphasized broader leadership qualities such as judgment, collaboration, and integrity. The appointed leader was a commercial success, but the traits that earned selection were not purely financial. As one managing partner summarized, the most important quality isn't consensus-building OR commerciality—it's displaying clear, uncompromised judgement. One managing partner we spoke with spent several years as their firm's Chief Operating Officer before stepping into the top leadership role. This experience gave them a deep understanding of the business services and operational infrastructure that underpin firm performance—perspectives that proved invaluable once they assumed the top job.

Insight #3: “Organic” leadership development isn’t going away – but developing the next generation requires addressing its limitations

“People who choose to be lawyers don’t necessarily have natural management skills, but these can be learned through formal discussions – and this can equip people to succeed.”

In the time-tested leadership development model practiced by most firms, the potential candidates for management committee/managing partner roles emerge organically over time, gradually gaining notice and hands-on experience through progressive committee, office, and practice leadership roles. Most leaders stressed how intentional this approach is in both skill-building and testing for qualities that will be required in senior leadership.

“Succession and development is not just about the individual needs of the future leader. We have a number of active, real committees that provide visibility on how offices are run so that, when it comes to succession, there are a fair number of people who (a) know how things are run, and (b) have been tested through active experience with governance.”

Across our interviews, no leader predicted that this “organic” model would be overthrown any time soon – the continued success of most top firms justifies the continuation. But they identified three clear limitations – all of which point the way towards the need for evolution.

Limitation 1: Narrowing the pipeline too early

Early anointment is common—and risky. As one leader put it, “A small number of people get a lot of attention early in their careers. Then that attention begets more attention.” Overemphasizing early stars can exclude others developing at a different pace. One firm even banned the word “superstar” from performance reviews to prevent this bias. By taking a more balanced assessment approach from the start, firms can surface ‘quieter’ talent who might not have the flash of a rising star, but are well—perhaps, better—equipped to lead.

Limitation 2: Rewarding attributes misaligned with senior leadership need

The traits that drive success in client and legal work do not always translate into effective firm leadership. As one leader observed, “Sometimes partners love the leader title, but not the actions that come with it.”

Succeeding in committees demands a high degree of caution and attentiveness to how others perceive you – but these same qualities can be a barrier to becoming a decisive, confident leader. “Often, when contenders rise to the top through committees, it’s because they haven’t done anything to damage how others see them – they have been cautious and careful. This isn’t necessarily the quality you need in someone who will lead your firm into the future.”

Limitation 3: Relying on an apprenticeship model that, in some firms, is becoming obsolete

As firms expand through mergers and lateral hiring, long-standing informal development pathways weaken. New partners have less institutional memory and fewer natural opportunities to build influence. Instead, firms must create deliberate, structured opportunities for leadership exposure, development, and feedback—ensuring that succession is not left to chance.

Insight #4: Firms are introducing structural and formal enhancements to leadership development

Recognizing these limitations, many firms are now strengthening their organic model with structural and programmatic initiatives that make leadership development more intentional.

Structural adaptations: At a macro scale, the flat structures typical of most firms can contribute to a lack of opportunities for leadership development. To address these structural issues, one revamped their practice structure to create more leadership positions, identify competencies, and add annual performance expectations and feedback. This structural shift not only promoted distributive leadership, but also allowed each leader to be more proactive and thoughtful in how they considered succession, talent pipelining, and development. Since the firm underwent this transformation, its culture has evolved; now, "everyone should have a leadership role, even if it's not 'capital L' leadership."

Implementing term limits: Term limits for leadership positions can facilitate more effective succession planning. "There's a magical beauty to term limits," one leader remarked. By setting clear endpoints for leadership tenures, firms can ensure smooth transitions and prepare for future leadership needs with intentionality. Term limits encourage leaders to focus on legacy and impact rather than short-term gains, fostering an environment where leadership is viewed as stewardship. One leader we spoke with imposed his own limits, stating that he would serve only a certain number of years and would never seek re-election. This

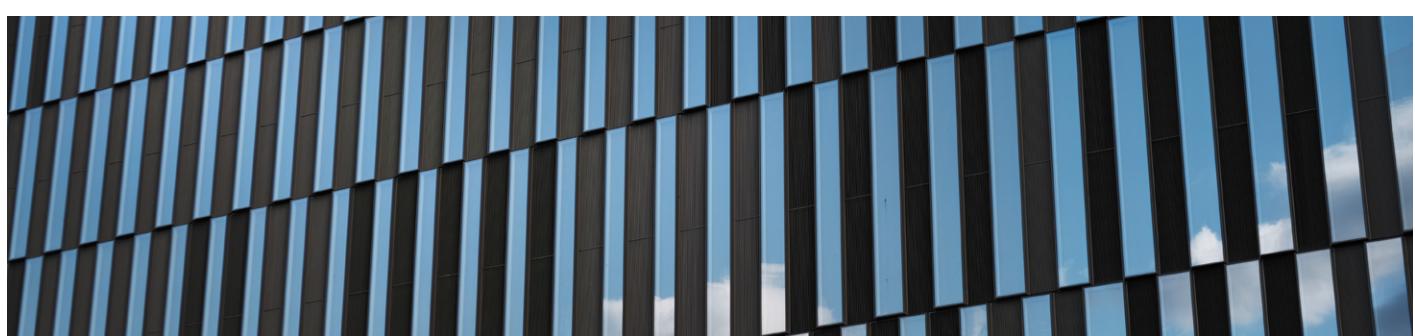
clarity freed him to lead with the firm's best interests in mind throughout his tenure.

To complement structural changes, firms are investing in formal leadership development efforts. These include:

Internal and external advisors: One firm identified the leadership skills needed to align with its strategy, culture, and future challenges – then, to bridge the gaps, they brought in leadership development coaches with experience advising top law firm leaders to support the select group of individuals preparing for top roles. Several other firms mentioned coaches who were retired partners from that firm's own ranks. These internal emeritus partners were available to offer advice grounded in the firm's own history and culture.

Programmatic leadership development: Some firms seek out third parties who can design programs that have accountability and structure, tailoring these to the firm's culture while also introducing the firm to leadership concepts and best practices from other industries.

Institutionalized upward feedback: A number of law firms introduced upward feedback to enhance the development of their senior partners and firm leaders. For instance, collaborating with external consultants like RRA, they design feedback processes that provide valuable insights into leadership effectiveness, areas for improvement, and foster a culture of continuous development.





Insight #5: Purposeful, long-term leadership development requires a cultural shift

Leadership development is not a one-time event; it is a cultural choice. Law firm leaders often reference historical eras through the names of former managing partners—"in Jane's days," or "under Ezra." These references illustrate how profoundly a leader shapes firm culture. Yet culture also shapes leadership. Often, a partner becomes a "natural choice" because they embody qualities the culture already values.

But even if a leader's name becomes a shorthand, culture is never fully defined by a single leader - or even by a leadership team. Culture is the unwritten rules for how work gets done; the underlying assumptions beneath how decisions are made. It impacts how leaders rise and fall, and which ones are ultimately successful. Indeed, it could even be argued that a culture produces a leader, rather than vice versa - that a given partner starts to seem like the natural choice because they represent qualities that are required at that moment in time.

Given the dialectic between culture and firm leadership, the role that culture should play in a firm's leadership development and succession is both subtle and critically important. When it comes to selecting the top leaders, a clear understanding of culture - both its "bright sides," such as people's pride and affinity in the firm, as well as its "dark sides," such as behavior patterns that stand in the way of success - must be at the heart of succession. [Developing a clear-eyed view of culture helps firms make leadership](#)

[decisions that have the greatest impact](#), and weaves succession practices into the firm's fabric.

When implementing formal leadership development initiatives—such as external programs or executive education—it's crucial to assess their compatibility with the firm's existing culture. For instance, a firm with an entrepreneurial ethos successfully provided budgets to leaders, empowering them to choose their own development opportunities. This approach resonated with their culture of autonomy. Conversely, in a firm that places a high premium on structure and consistency, this approach might not align well, potentially leading to resistance. Point being: it's important to align your firm's development approach with its cultural identity to ensure meaningful acceptance.

Several leaders observed that formal leadership development programs and structural changes can initially feel unnatural. Over time, however, their benefits become so evident that they began to feel intrinsic, demonstrating that intentional development efforts can indeed shift organizational culture. In one interview, a leader described years of intentional effort to modify a historical culture of occasional, one-directional feedback towards one that embraces proactive, strategic, and iterative conversations about succession. She summed this up beautifully by saying, "continuously developing leaders is now an embedded priority in our culture."

Looking ahead: The future of development and succession in law firms

"In the future, law firms will be run more like businesses than partnerships. Consensus will still matter, but so will agility, direction, and decisiveness."

The leaders we interviewed widely agreed that tomorrow's firms will require different capabilities from those of the past. The growing scale and complexity of global firms suggest that the traditional "organic" development model has reached its natural limit.

Proactive, purposeful succession planning is now a necessity. While most leaders recognize its importance, they also acknowledge that implementing it can be awkward and counter-cultural. As one put it, "Succession planning is a little like talking to your parents about the will." Yet avoiding the conversation poses far greater risks.

Our research shows that while the average internally promoted CEO spends about seven years at their company before assuming the top job, law firm leaders typically spend two decades within their firms before becoming partners. The next leader is almost certainly already inside the organization. To prepare them, leadership development must be a sustained organizational behavior—not a one-time process. Firms that institutionalize succession planning manage transitions with greater stability and avoid being caught unprepared when change comes unexpectedly.

Leadership development in law firms is a nuanced process that requires strategic focus, courage, clarity about the culture, and a willingness to move in new directions. In the next generation, we envision law firms cultivating leaders equipped to navigate the complexities of today's legal industry, but this evolution will require focused effort. Firms that invest deliberately in their future leaders will be better positioned for transitions and outpace peers in an increasingly competitive landscape. The journey demands persistence and reflection, but the reward—a resilient, forward-thinking firm—is well worth the effort.



Authors

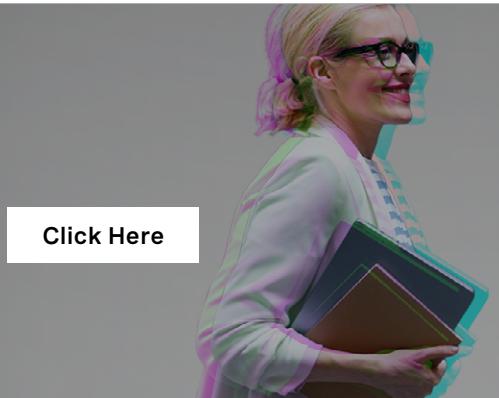
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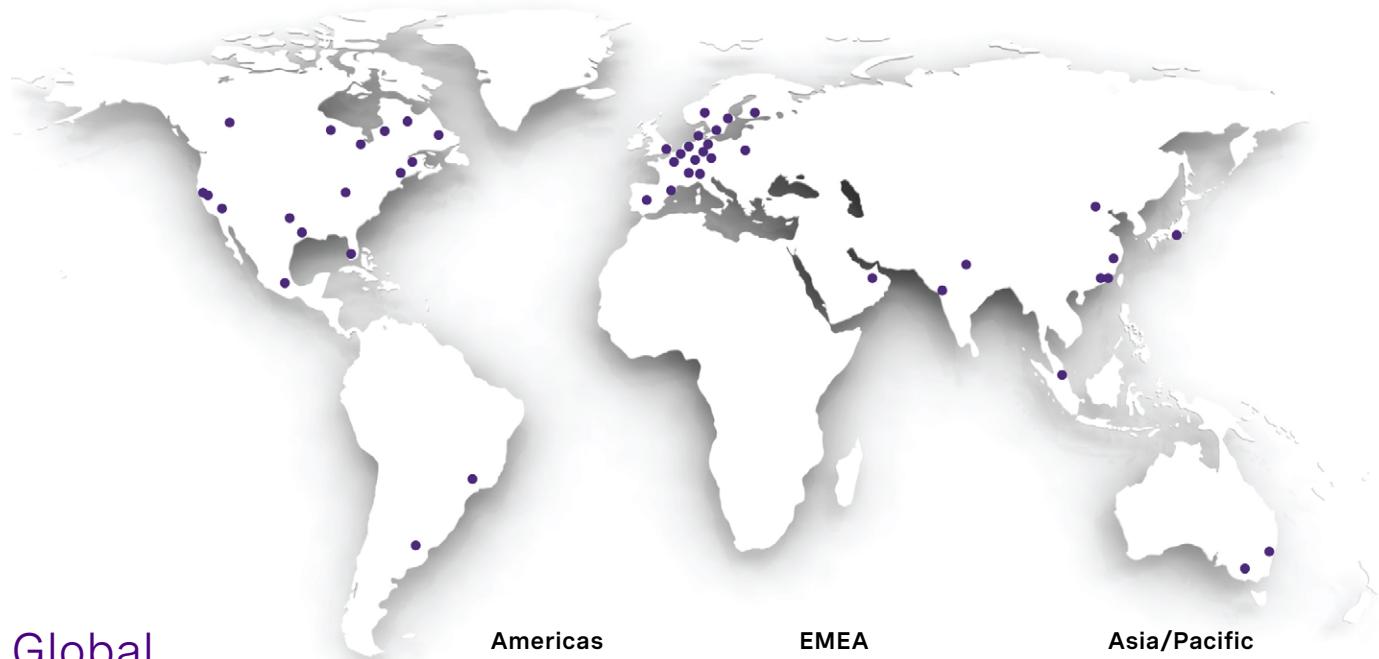
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