

Strong culture isn't soft—
it's a strategic advantage
that drives a law firm's
employee retention, trust,
and long-term success.

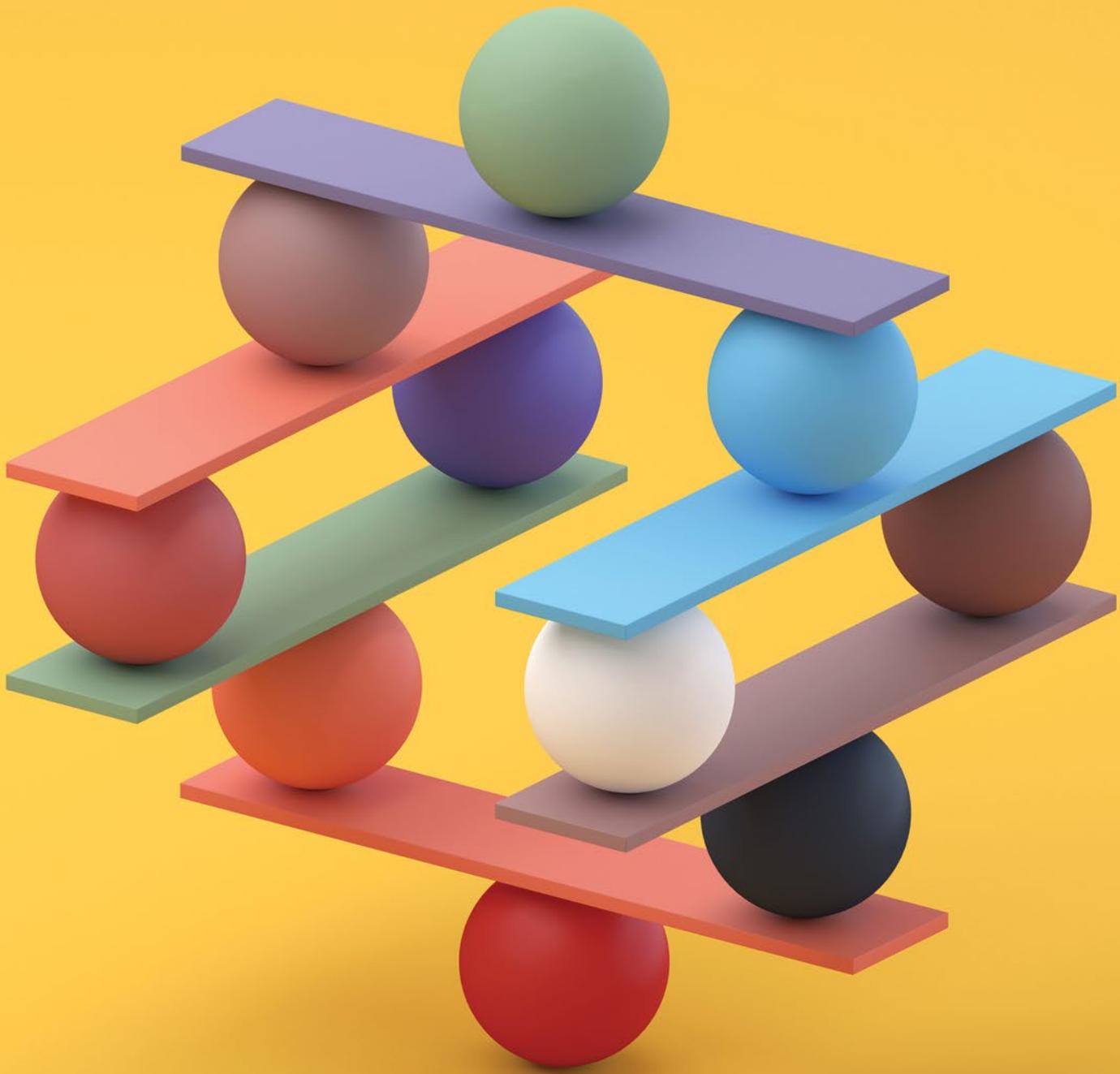
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CULTURE COUNTS

Most clients don't want to need a lawyer. When someone contacts your firm, something unexpected—often unfortunate—has happened. Few professions depend on clients making a call they hope they'll never have to make.

Meeting those high stakes requires more than legal expertise. Your team brings its own strengths, experiences, and motivations for choosing this work. Running a firm requires guiding people, not just managing cases.

Leadership and organizational alignment determine whether a firm thrives or merely survives. Without clarity, firms face burnout, inefficiency, and costly turnover.



Today's workforce—especially Gen Z and millennial employees—expect authenticity, flexibility, and purpose. High-performing firms design environments where well-defined roles and clear expectations support a shared vision rather than relying on one overextended leader.

When leadership falters, the costs escalate quickly. Here's what those costs look like—and how to prevent them.

High Turnover

Nearly 50,000 plaintiff firms operate in the United States, most with only three employees.¹ In firms of any size, a single misstep can ripple outward. When someone leaves, the disruption isn't just inconvenient—it can destabilize the firm. A hiring mistake drains time, training, and trust. Team members who aren't aligned with common firm or case goals miss deadlines and make avoidable errors. And when leaders aren't in sync, confusion spreads through staff and ultimately reaches clients.

The ABA found that clients often switch lawyers because of communication problems, poor fit, or perceived lack of competence—not because of case outcomes.² No amount of legal expertise can remedy that. The solution lies in leadership, clear roles, and strong firm culture.

Stagnation

Trial lawyers excel at casework, but many firms stay trapped working *in* the business instead of *on* it. When your focus stays locked on intake, briefs, and trials, foundational questions go unanswered: Who are we? What do we stand for? Where are we going? This creates questions and confusion for staff, which filters down to clients through conflicting answers and misinformation.

Growth requires stepping out of the daily grind to examine how you operate. Strategic planning and leadership development are investments in sustainability, engagement, retention, and client satisfaction.

Working on the business multiplies the impact of your work in the business.

Low Morale

The good news: Employee engagement doesn't come from perks. It grows from purpose, trust, inclusion, care, and recognition. When employees don't see

meaning in their work or feel valued, they leave.

Help employees see that their work directly contributes to an injured client's recovery and case outcome, not just to task completion, and you turn a job into a mission and a career.

Misalignment rarely stems from lack of talent. It comes from unclear expectations and unspoken assumptions. Clear, consistent communication anchors every high-performing team. Success is rarely a solo effort. Teamwork, alignment, and shared accountability make it possible.

Lost Talent, Marred Reputation

Many trial lawyers dismiss culture as something squishy compared to litigation's pace. But culture is a measurable business driver. Every firm has one—by design or default. Strong cultures improve retention, engagement, and client outcomes. Weak cultures cost talent, money, and credibility.

Healthy cultures demonstrate accountability, respect, and consistency. Everyone knows their role and follows through. They acknowledge and value differences. Whether you're building a new firm or steering one decades old, it's never too late to shape the culture you want. Start by assessing your current reality honestly and clarifying your mission and values.

Your mission should clearly state why your firm exists. For example, one firm's mission—"We advocate for and help achieve justice for clients injured by others by providing quality legal services and continually growing our business"—signals a quality-driven, growth-oriented personal injury practice, not a volume shop.

Another firm states: "We use a unique team approach to provide relationship-based, aggressive representation." This language communicates a collaborative culture, a client-centered mindset, and a willingness to go to trial.

Define the culture you want—and the behaviors you expect from every team member—by clearly articulating your values. Doing so creates a shared language for how work gets done. For instance, if communication is a core value, define what it means at your firm, whether that includes proactive updates, active listening, or speaking up. Without clear, behavior-based definitions, employees will fill in the gaps differently.

One firm handling sex abuse cases identified balance as a core value, recognizing the emotional

toll of the work. The firm tied it to specific behaviors: prioritizing self-care to better support each client; asking for help instead of trying to do it alone; and supporting colleagues who might not recognize their own need for balance.

Once defined, share your values with the team and reinforce them consistently. Embed them in hiring, onboarding and performance processes, and your website so both your team and clients understand who you are.

A shared language around behavior clarifies expectations and makes performance conversations easier. For example, if accountability is a core value defined in part by an “every case is my case” mentality, feedback becomes more direct. Saying “that’s not my case” or blaming others for failure does not align with accountability.

Most importantly, everyone—from rainmakers to rookies—must model the desired culture. For example, if consistency is a stated value but a partner refuses to use the case management system, the message is clear—and it is not the one you intended.

Culture isn’t a retreat topic or an annual agenda item. It’s your firm’s operating system and requires focus and intention.

Poor Recruiting

Recruiting is where culture begins. Overselling your environment only plants the seeds of disengagement. If you don’t offer remote work, don’t say you do. If a role offers limited growth, be honest about it. Don’t promise daily work-life balance if trials regularly require all hands on deck. Write job descriptions that reflect real responsibilities. Let candidates speak with current team members. Share candid expectations about workload and growth.

Hire for performance, communication, and fit over the long term—not just technical ability. Top candidates don’t expect perfection. They expect honesty. When you offer it, you attract people who stay.

Offering an Ideal

Too many firms engage in “corporate catfishing,” overselling culture and working conditions to hire quickly.

Common misrepresentations may include overpromising work-life balance, hiding the lack of structure or growth paths, inflating compensation

Misalignment rarely stems from lack of talent.



or advancement potential, portraying the workplace as collaborative despite attorneys working in silos, and avoiding hard truths about workload and expectations.

The result is predictable: distrust, low loyalty, high turnover, and “shift shock”—the realization that a job doesn’t match its promise.

The damage extends beyond the office. Platforms like Glassdoor and LinkedIn amplify discontent, affecting your reputation with talent and clients alike.

Younger generations, in particular, expect transparency and reciprocity. Miss the mark, and they’ll walk.

Unclear Direction

Leadership alignment ensures everyone sees and understands the big picture—and reinforces it until it sticks. Mission and values form the foundation.

Consistent repetition strengthens culture, recruiting, and decision-making. A clear vision defines where the firm is headed and prevents strategy from becoming reactive or driven by the loudest voice.

For example, one firm’s vision states, “We will continue to grow in areas where we can contribute and make a difference.” That single line creates guardrails for growth and enables thoughtful decisions aligned with the firm’s values, rather than chasing opportunities based on individual preference or whim.

Alignment also depends on what Stephen Covey called “emotional bank accounts.”³ You make deposits through respect, clarity, and follow-through. You make withdrawals through neglect and broken promises. Because everyone experiences these moments differently, leaders must understand each team member’s communication style, decision-making preferences, and priorities. Assessment tools can reveal those differences and strengthen collaboration and client interactions.⁴

Every interaction builds or erodes trust. Deposits must outweigh withdrawals—with staff and clients alike. Over time, that balance defines your reputation.

Lack of Accountability

Once the team understands the vision, accountability turns it into action. Accountability isn’t punishment—it’s clarity. When people fall short, we often blame incompetence when ambiguity is the real culprit.

Clear accountability begins with a defined mission, vision, and values—and comes to life through S.M.A.R.T. goals.⁵ Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound goals turn ideas into measurable action.

Most firms want more clients but stumble by skipping the details. Here is that same objective as a S.M.A.R.T. goal: Increase the rate at which intakes turn into signed clients from 42% to 55% by September 30, 2026, using standardized intake scripts and same-day follow-up on all leads.

Clarity reduces stress, builds trust, and improves performance because everyone knows what’s expected, how success is measured, and who owns each responsibility. This transparency frees lawyers and staff to focus on execution instead of deciphering shifting priorities.

Hold yourself accountable for team health through monthly check-ins or pulse surveys. These

tools help reveal small issues before they escalate into turnover or client problems. A simple check-in framework is more/less/different: What can the firm do more of, less of, or differently, and what should I do differently as a leader?

Pulse surveys offer a quick read on employee sentiment. Consider questions such as

- I understand what is expected of me in my role (clarity)
- I have the tools, resources, and support I need (operational and staffing issues)
- Communication is timely and clear (trust and engagement)
- I would recommend this firm if a friend or family member is injured (engagement)

Culture as Competitive Advantage

Regardless of firm size, every hire and every interaction shapes your culture. Authenticity attracts talent. Collaboration, inclusion, and respect keep people engaged. Strong culture isn’t optional. It’s your competitive advantage. It drives retention, reputation, and results.

The next time you wonder whether leadership alignment is worth the investment, ask yourself: What is the cost of bad leadership? It’s not just turnover or missed cases—it’s reputation, client trust, and your firm’s long-term success. 



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NOTES

1. *Personal Injury Lawyers and Attorneys in the US—Employment (2005-2031)*, IBISWorld, www.ibisworld.com/united-states/employment/personal-injury-lawyers-attorneys/4812 (last updated July 2025).
2. *What If I Am Unhappy With My Lawyer?*, Am. Bar Ass’n (June 7, 2018), www.tinyurl.com/yh6xym38.
3. Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989).
4. Assessment tools include Everything DiSC, The Five Behaviors, CliftonStrengths, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and the Enneagram test.
5. See Brett Day, *The Ultimate Guide to S.M.A.R.T. Goals*, Forbes Advisor (June 2, 2025), www.forbes.com/advisor/business/smart-goals.