



Dr. Larry Richard

# Herding cats:

## The lawyer personality revealed

**Ed note:** The following condensed version of Dr. Larry Richard's feature article on "herding cats" is reproduced with permission of the author. The full text is available at [www.hildebrandt.com/Documents.aspx?Doc\\_ID=2430](http://www.hildebrandt.com/Documents.aspx?Doc_ID=2430)

*"Managing lawyers is like herding cats." It turns out that the old saying is based on fact. I've been studying the personality traits of lawyers for the past twenty years, and have measured dozens of traits among thousands of lawyers. Research confirms that not only are lawyers highly autonomous, but they share a number of personality traits that distinguish them from the general public.*

These "lawyer personality traits" have broad implications for the management of lawyers, the cultivation of rainmakers, the retention of associates and a range of other critical issues in the day-to-day practice of law. This article examines how lawyers differ from the lay public – in some cases significantly – and how rainmakers differ from other lawyers. I'll then discuss how such personality data can be used to improve hiring and management.

[The Caliper Profile test] has been in use for over 35 years. Over one million professionals, business managers, sales people and other executive level individuals have been profiled with this tool. Over the past few years, it's become the test I rely on most frequently in helping lawyers understand the personality forces at work in their firms. At this point, I've profiled more than 1,000 lawyers with the Caliper Profile – mostly in senior management positions in

law firms and corporate law departments. The patterns may surprise you.

## Rainmaking

Perhaps the most intriguing data has to do with the personality traits of successful rainmakers. Harold Weinstein, Chief Operating Officer of Caliper Corporation, notes that “over the years our research has shown that there’s a strong correlation between performance and motivation. People who are working in roles that are consistent with their personality, values and interpersonal characteristics generally outperform those who are less well-matched, by a ratio of two-to-one. Nowhere is this pattern more consistent than in the role of selling or ‘rainmaking’.”

In a study jointly conducted by Caliper and Altman Weil in 1998, we looked at a group of 95 lawyers judged by their peers to be “excellent lawyers.” The group was divided into two subgroups: successful rainmakers and “service partners.” The former were in the top echelon in terms of developing new business; the latter were in the bottom echelon, despite their other standout qualities. The average Ego Drive score for the rainmakers was 60 (on a scale of 0 to 100) compared to only 38 for the service partners.

The average Ego Strength score for the rainmakers was 63 compared to only 43 for the service partners.

And the average Empathy score for rainmakers was 75 compared to only 65 for the service partners. (This difference was not statistically significant, but will likely turn out to be so with a larger sample size. Lawyers across the board tend to score a bit above average in empathy.)

In short, the Caliper Profile clearly differentiates between those with the personality profile frequently associated with successful selling and those who are not very successful.

Does this mean that if you don’t have a “rainmaker’s personality” you can’t originate business? Of course not. But it does suggest that some people, by virtue of their personality, are much more comfortable in the rainmaking role and can’t not make rain, whereas for the rest of us it may be a struggle. Since rainmaking is an important function in any law firm, many lawyers with lower scores on the key rainmaking traits will nevertheless make an effort to originate business, and some will succeed. However, as a general rule, they will find it much less comfortable, much harder to do, and less rewarding than it is for the classical rainmaker.

One other key implication of this data is that since personality traits like these tend to remain fairly stable over time, some degree of predictability is possible. So, for example, if you are hiring a lateral associate and you want to increase the odds of hiring an individual who will become a strong business generator as a partner, you can gather data using the Caliper Profile that will increase your odds of hiring an associate with rainmaking potential.

By the way, the three classical sales traits were not the only distinctions we found in our research. Successful rainmakers

also scored more assertive, sociable, risk-taking and confident, and significantly less cautious (less of a perfectionist) and less skeptical (more trusting) than the service partners.

## Herding cats

Since our 1998 research, we have profiled several hundred more lawyers and have observed some distinct and persistent patterns that may offer insight to frustrated managing partners about why it’s sometimes difficult to get your partners to go along with even seemingly simple management decisions.

### THE SKEPTIC

Let’s start with a trait called “Skepticism”. People who score high on this trait tend to be skeptical, even cynical, judgmental, questioning, argumentative and somewhat self-protective. People who score low tend to be accepting of others, trusting, and give others the benefit of the doubt.

In larger firms that we have profiled, the trait known as Skepticism is consistently the highest scoring trait among lawyers, averaging around *the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile!*

These high levels of skepticism explain many of the oddities and frustrations encountered in trying to manage lawyers.

First, it’s likely that high levels of this trait are important for success as a lawyer in many areas of practice such as litigation, tax or M&A work.

Second, the average person tends to use his or her stronger personality traits across all situations, rather than turning them on and off at will. Thus, if the profession attracts highly skeptical individuals, these skeptical lawyers will be skeptical not only when they’re representing a client but also in other roles which might actually require *lower* levels of skepticism. In other words, the skeptical litigator may be well-suited for adversarial encounters, but this same litigator will maintain the skeptical stance in partnership meetings, while mentoring younger lawyers, or in heading up a committee despite the fact that these situations may all be performed more effectively in a climate of trust, acceptance and collaboration.

### THE URGENT

Another trait that distinguishes lawyers from the general public is their higher Urgency scores. A high score on Urgency is characterized by impatience, a need to get things done, a sense of immediacy. Low scorers tend to be patient, contemplative, measured, in no particular rush. The excellent lawyers in our study scored roughly twenty per cent higher on this trait than the general public. Awareness about one’s own level of Urgency can immediately improve one’s effectiveness with others.

Urgent people charge around like they are on their way to a fire. They may finish others’ sentences, jump to conclusions, be impulsive. There is an intensity to their behavioral style, since they are results-oriented. They seek efficiency and economy in

everything from conversations to case management to relationships. While clients certainly reward many lawyers for moving their matters along, Urgency can have a negative side as well. Urgent people are sometimes brusque, poor listeners, and can be annoying to many people. This can add a level of tension to meetings, a level of frustration to mentor/mentee relationships, and a sense of oppression to lawyer/secretary interactions.

The potential downside of this trait emerges most significantly in interpersonal relationships. Urgent lawyers who try to be “efficient in relationships” may eventually realize how oxymoronic this idea is.

### THE SOCIABLE

This may also explain why lawyers also differ from the general population so dramatically in the next trait – Sociability. The excellent lawyers in the Caliper/Altman Weil study had an average Sociability score of only 12.8%, compared to an average of 50% for the general public.

Sociability is described as a desire to interact with people, especially a comfort level in initiating new, intimate connections with others. Low scorers are not necessarily anti-social. Rather, they simply find it uncomfortable to initiate intimate relationships and so are more likely to rely on relationships that already exist, relationships in which they’ve already done the hard “getting-to-know-you” part, such as their spouses, friends and family members.

What this also means is that at work low scorers are less inclined to enjoy interacting with others, and may prefer to spend more time dealing with information, the intellect, or interactions that emphasize the mind rather than the heart.

Is it any wonder that lawyers score low on this trait? The law is a profession devoted to logic and the intellect. Almost every law firm has standards of intellectual rigor which can be seen in their hiring processes and in the adulation paid to intellectually superior lawyers. Yet it’s hard to find a law firm that pays equal attention to the importance of relationships, that rewards and supports the cultivation of “quality time” among its professional personnel or in any way measures one’s people skills.

Low Sociability scores have broad implications for many aspects of law firm management – mentoring, teamwork, practice group leadership, client retention, support staff turnover, and rainmaking. In our Caliper/Altman Weil study, rainmakers scored nearly *three and a half times higher on Sociability* than the service partners!

### RESILIENCE

Another important trait on which lawyers depart from the general norm is Resilience or Ego Strength, which we touched on briefly under *Rainmaking* above. People who are low on Resilience tend to be defensive, resist taking in feedback, and can be hypersensitive to criticism. In the hundreds of cases we’ve gathered, nearly all of the lawyers we’ve profiled (90 per

cent of them) score in the lower half of this trait, with the average being 30 per cent. The range is quite wide, with quite a number of lawyers scoring in the bottom tenth percentile.

What does this tell us? Despite the outward confidence and even boldness that characterizes most lawyers, we may be a bit more sensitive under the surface. These lower scores suggest a self-protective quality. This may explain why so many partners’ meetings get sidetracked into defensive exchanges and why a simple request to turn in timesheets is often met with a defensive tirade.

Finally, let’s look at the “herding cats” trait itself – Autonomy. Our most recent data, principally from larger firms, suggests that lawyers’ Autonomy scores generally average at the 89<sup>th</sup> percentile. In other words, it’s common for lawyers to resist being managed, to bridle at being told what to do, and to prize their independence.

## Management and leadership applications

Anyone in a leadership position in a law firm – managing partners, heads of practice groups, members of management or executive committees, heads of branch offices – must learn their own personality traits and understand how they compare to the averages for the general population, the averages for lawyers, and the averages for your own firm.

It is also helpful to profile all the lawyers in the firm, or at least all of the owners. This not only gives valuable feedback to each individual, but also provides everyone with aggregate data about the personality contours of the firm. Are there blind spots? Are there large clusters of individuals with extreme scores on a particular trait? Are there personality “factions”, i.e. one cluster of individuals with low scores on a particular trait and another cluster of individuals with a high score on that trait? The aggregate distribution of certain personality traits in a firm helps to shape the culture of the firm.

This culture-shaping process is usually invisible and goes on outside of our conscious awareness. But through effective use of testing, the curtain can be pulled back. Armed with this information, the lawyers in a firm can develop a greater sense of their strengths, more consciously build a firm culture, evolve a clearer marketing strategy, hire more intelligently, and cultivate business development in a more sensible fashion than requiring every partner to become a rainmaker.

## Hiring and selection

Although designed as a selection tool, the Caliper Profile has emerged as an excellent tool for coaching, development, leadership training and other internal applications. But its greatest strength is its ability to help an employer reduce the risk of making a hiring mistake by helping to create a job match.

A candidate can be matched to (a) a job; (b) a person; or (c) a group or organization. By far the most common is job matching.

First, the firm develops a job description, listing key tasks and competencies that will be required for the job, as well as desirable and undesirable personal traits. Then potential candidates in the “finalist pool” are tested. The resulting personality profile can then be compared to the job requirements to see how well a particular candidate fits.

The same kind of comparison can be made between a job candidate and an individual with whom he or she might be working. Likewise, if you know the aggregate strengths and weaknesses of a partnership, you can seek a candidate that fills a gap or rounds out your resource roster. Bear in mind that greater diversity is almost always an advantage when it comes to personality. The key is understanding how to build a big tent while at the same time creating a culture in which differences are valued rather than becoming fuel for conflict. A diverse firm, with a culture that truly values diversity, will provide a greater competitive advantage than a firm filled with one basic personality style.

One important clarification is in order here. Some lawyers are critical of personality testing (I told you they were skeptical). But they often misunderstand the proper use of such testing, mistakenly assuming that the test will be used as a cut-off tool much in the way that a typing test might screen out any candidate for a secretarial job who can't exceed 75 words per minute. Properly used, personality testing should never be used as a cut-off tool. It is much more effective and appropriate when used to confirm, clarify or uncover.

Proper testing is always done after the candidate has survived at least an initial round of interviews. At this point, the lawyers who have conducted the interviews have formed some informal and unscientific opinions about a candidate's strengths, weaknesses, attractiveness, qualifications, etc. A good psychological test can help add insight to what the interviewers have discerned, confirming their hunches and adding more objective support to the mix.

Let's say that half the interviewers came away with the impression that the candidate was pretty detail-oriented, while the other half of the interview team came away convinced that the candidate was a “big-picture” person. By one version of common sense, these divergent impressions are incompatible. A person is either detail-oriented or big-picture but not both.

But human nature is more complex than that, and a good personality test can uncover nuances that make apparent inconsistencies like this make sense. In the Caliper Profile, for instance, one could be high on Cautiousness (wanting to make sure that all the “i's” are dotted and the “t's” are crossed before going public with information), yet low on Thoroughness (not wanting to dig into the details, preferring the big picture, approximations). The combination is not all that unusual, and someone with this particular profile might appear to be detail-oriented when providing information that they know others will rely upon, yet be very much a big-picture person when it comes to how they conceptualize problems. If two interview teams asked different kinds of questions, each could elicit a piece of the puzzle,

leading to inconsistent impressions which the personality test could easily clarify and harmonize.

There is another less obvious benefit to this approach. One recent study suggests that job satisfaction is higher and job turnover is lower among new hires who were given low expectations in the hiring interview than among those to whom a rosy picture was painted. In the example given above, the candidate was in effect given lower expectations – “You might not get the mentoring you need;” “People here can sometimes be quite critical;” “There can be a lot of pressure on this job.” These lower expectations in effect inoculated the candidate against later job dissatisfaction.

## The dysfunctional law firm

Finally, personality testing is one of our most effective tools in helping firms, or groups of lawyers within firms, that are dysfunctional. We all know of law firms in which the partners bicker with one another, backbite behind closed doors (or in open meetings), experience high turnover, have lowered morale, or show any of the other classic symptoms of a dysfunctional firm. In almost every case, the understanding gained by profiling the lawyers and explaining their personality differences helps to defuse the conflict and shift from “taking differences personally” to understanding and accepting differences.

Bear in mind that a dysfunctional firm involves very complex group dynamics, and personality feedback by itself is not a cure-all. But it is one very effective arrow in the quiver of organizational improvement tools. Joe Welty, Managing Partner of Miles & Stockbridge in Baltimore, remembers when we helped his firm several years ago, “I found the personality feedback to be very valuable and very telling about how we interact with each other and almost predictive of how the group will interact in the future and stay together as a group. I really believe in it.” In Joe's case, the personality feedback he's referring to came from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or MBTI, another widely used personality measure.

## In summary

This article has given you a glimpse into the personality traits of lawyers and provided you with some insight into the ways that personality information can be used to help a law practice operate in a more business-like fashion. Make personality insights part of your repertoire, and you may improve your performance and management.

---

*Dr. Larry Richard is the head of the Leadership & Organization Development Practice Group with Hildebrandt International, a leading professional services consulting firm. Dr. Richards pioneered the application of psychology and other behavioral sciences to the improvement of leadership and management practices in the legal profession. Dr. Richards can be reached at [rRichard@hildebrandt.com](mailto:rRichard@hildebrandt.com).*