



**The jury is out.... Is it possible to coach (dysfunctional) Lawyers?**

**Dr Sally Vanson**

# Background

- Qualitative grounded theory study with some narrative analysis due to the richness of language
- I used NVIVO software for the analysis ( enables deep analysis, linking, shaping, searching and modelling of large amounts of qualitative data).
- Notice the language of the quotes
- Context is large second tier UK law firm 800+ employees with HQ in London or Bristol
- In depth interviews with 12 senior partners (2 female)
- Can be generalised to other professions

# Did you know.....

- Lawyers die earlier after retirement than any other profession.
- The largest segment of women attending fertility clinics are lawyers.
- Lawyers hugely outstrip other members of other professions attending The Priory for drug and alcohol rehabilitation.
- Recent studies and the proliferation of "lawyer assistance" programmes indicate that issues surrounding stress management, depression and anxiety, as well as addictive and/or compulsive behaviors are increasingly negatively impacting and even impairing law students and lawyers.

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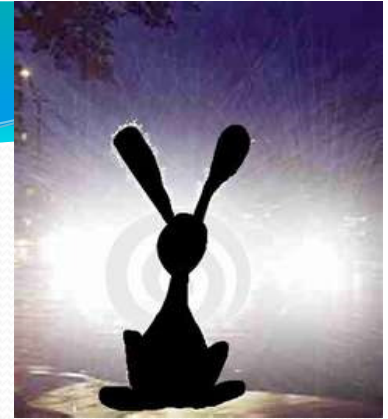
# Why did I undertake this study?

- **Curiosity – what was going on?**

- Consulting project with large law firm and became curious about the culture, values and behaviours exhibited.
  - Very high levels of ego and arrogance. *“We need to remain positive and continue to achieve ..... Firms need a lawyer at the helm and not a non-legal CEO like that b..... that took over my last firm. He’ll cripple it.....” (L4).*
  - Negative perceptions of firms and especially partners expressed privately by associate and assistant lawyers.
- Increasing press and anecdotal coverage about negative public perception of lawyers.
- Confusion and denial about the impact of the Legal Services Act(2007) implemented in 2011. *“We have a joke about someone buying the firm. It’s a questionable model for external capital... absolute return implies an exit, the partners would be salaried destroys career expectations. The only impact will be if other firms do it, then we will be vulnerable” (P1).*



# The context of participants



- Their firms followed the Innovative *'Magic circle firms'* .
- Senior legal partners often work as individuals and not collaboratively.
- Legal work is a safety net for partners. *"you're much better to stay as the expert running your team and being influential on the thing, and taking the money because there's no risk in it" (P6)*
- Relatively little post graduate education.
- The Legal Services Act (2007), deregulation of the profession and the need for alternative business structures are causing meteoric change.
- 25% of law firm partners can now be non-lawyers.
- Specialist authors suggest there needs to be a strategic focus on commerciality, business analysis and leadership with employee engagement and change management rather than legal expertise.
- There is a huge 'wake-up call' for the legal profession.
- Senior partners need to acquire new knowledge and to review inter and intra-personal ways of working in order to respond. *\_\_"Concerned..... nothing else to say (laugh) do I care..... not really, I'll be long gone" (L1)*



# Can senior partners change?

- *“ It might be that I have to keep giving them such tough medicine to make them change that at the end of it they’ve had enough but that’s what goes with this. It’s just more about saying you’ve got to be competitive, guys but are they going to work in teams, have they got emotional intelligence? Again a perverse thing is we may be creating some monsters because you need .....monsters to survive .....I think some of them are actually autistic.....some of them have got no interpersonal skills .....and actually we need them to make sure we carry on .....”. (P6).*

# Comparing context and literature led to Research Questions.

- Do senior partners in legal services firms possess the core characteristics of identity to work in alignment within the firm?
  - What are the core characteristics of the identity challenges faced by senior partners in UK legal firms in 2010?
  - What tensions result from these challenges?
  - How do these senior partners align identity work to respond to these identity challenges and tensions?

*4 areas of focus; individual, group/firm, identity threats, balance & alignment*





# ...and they can do alignment...

- *“A good client is like a blood brother.....We need to have great client relationships or **your** career is ruined and what will happen then?.....My ability to develop outstanding relationships with clients and retain them. Social skills, knowing what to say, carrying the conversation .....Your clients are **your** best friends, closer than **your** families, love them, no such thing as a bad client they feed **you**”. (L4)*

***\*All quotes are as stated hence conversational language.***



# Symbols and superiority.....

- “*they* earn more money than the vast majority of people, *they* have *bigger houses and that kind of thing*. So it creates *this superiority thing*, which *they* know is perhaps not *based on substance and so it comes back, putting on a front* and of course the moment *you* haven’t got a job anymore, *you’re* not earning and *you can’t afford the third house in France*, (because most of them *have got second or third things*, and we’d all like to have them, and sometimes it’s quite useful). It’s *collecting things, so the outside world can see how clever you are*”. (P6)



# Integration and balance....

*“The children keep me grounded and I devote my week-ends to them. I get up early if I need to work and my goal is for me to have a week-end on my own with my son. Life is about work, kids and husband. There is no time for me. I don’t believe in being ‘super Mum’ but I don’t have a nanny. I take the children to nursery in the morning and have no family back-up. I enjoy work I feel lucky it’s fascinating. My husband has his own business, he’s a lawyer too, which helps and he does all the domestic stuff. We are Jewish so family , food and religion are very important to me and keep me balanced and healthy and sustain me”. (L3)*



# No trust....

*“ ....I’ve changed a lot recently. No trust anymore.....**I am myself 25% of the time.** That’s all due to HR and Employment Law. It’s easy to get into trouble..... it’s more easy going in this firm although the older partners don’t always behave, you know what I mean..... in my last firm you couldn’t put a foot wrong . **I wouldn’t trust anyone at work anymore I’ve learned my lesson so they don’t get to know the real me**”. (L4)*

# Money, failure, image and armour

*“lawyers have been brought up to think that the world owes **them** a living. You know..... the most junior trainee starts on a salary higher than the average wage ..... and then **they** moan about it .... **they’re** doing really long hours under the pressure but **they’re** earning really loads of money and people expect them to be all round super people but, if **you’re** going to earn 3, 4 hundred thousand pounds **you** bloody well ought to be.....the nature of what drives **them** (is) to be clever the whole time and not to fail because of course none of them have ever failed. That is usually stressful, it’s one of the reasons **lawyers** are not good at selling..... because **their** self image is such **they** can’t be wrong. **They** build a suit of armour around themselves ..... a lot of this stress comes from fear of failure, and it’s self imposed. And I can identify with that..... I’m driven. Why am I here running this law firm when it’s a virtually impossible job - because I’m not going to let **the bastards** win”. (P6)*



# A glimmer of possibility.....

- *“You’ve asked a lot about me. In this game we don’t think about ourselves too much, it’s what’s on the outside and how others see you that matters. There are always people to impress; clients, staff, judges, potential clients. The whole game is played round people and it’s them who matter, far more than the law. Sorry I don’t have more time, you’ve made me think.....” (L1)*
- *“... this has been strangely therapeutic, has made me think. I wonder if I’m really happy but what is ‘happy’? I have a good life and should be thankful”. (P4)*
- *“...think you’ve covered everything and it’s been a valuable reflection even though I’ve gone on a lot and way over time. I would really like to read your results”. (P6)*

## **FINDINGS; RQ1. WHAT ARE THE CORE CHARACTERISTICS OF IDENTITY CHALLENGES FACED BY SENIOR LEGAL PARTNERS**

Cognitive and left brain focus

Individual arrogance supported by position and status

Risk averse

Fear of letting go of old norms that served them well

Want to operate from the safety of a familiar world

Lack of interest in external feedback, learning and acquiring non legal knowledge

Focus on eliminating problems rather than achieving goals

More interest in 'I' than 'we'

Strong need to 'fit in' and belong

Dismissive of colleagues' capabilities

Inauthentic and wear a 'mask'

Gap between individual and collective identity

Gap and tension within individual identity





## RQ2. WHAT TENSIONS RESULT FROM THE CHALLENGES



Challenge	Tension
Threat of non legal ownership of law firms	Little action being taken to change
Dysfunctional working styles	Blame others not self
Concern about future	No research as to what can be learned from other professions
Display of negative behaviours	Compound the issue of no balance
Secondary gain of negative emotion	Demotivated to commit to change
Impact of conditions on female partners	Leaving profession
Inability to review and reflect on 'self'	Consider alternative careers which run same patterns and characteristics
A need to work with internal and external perception	Learn to engage mind, body and spirit
Static and resistant attitudes to change	Ruling internalised archetype is lawyer
Participants play to weaknesses and not strengths	Fear and lack of confidence – 'imposter syndrome'

## **FINDINGS; RQ3. HOW DO SENIOR PARTNERS ALIGN IDENTITY WORK TO RESPOND TO THE IDENTITY CHALLENGES AND TENSIONS**

A lot of intellectualising and the decision to live a facade

Carefully planned behavioural strategies to underpin the facade and game playing

Hindered behavioural strategies result in fear and loss of confidence, 'imposter syndrome', and then re-anchor and reinforce the facade

Well learned facades become internalised and unconscious and are re-energised by a belief that good behaviours come from long hours, increased fees and money earned

All focus on client and not 'self' or 'firm'

The same emotions are used to drive suppression and support alignment so can be re-adapted

Conflict between wanting to 'fit' and 'be individual' cause a frozen state where 'self' is negated and behaviours which 'fit' are reinforced

'Fit' is defined as 'luck' or 'game playing'

Majority of participants are dissociated, failing to include themselves in their judgements and experiences and exacerbating the gap between core and role identity

There is no time for a slow emergent strategy to implement work towards alignment of individual and group

Individuals are open to 1:1 work





# Suggestions for coaching interventions

- Coaching through the Hero's Journey work (Campbell,1988) to help them identify and overcome challenges.
- Unwinding learned behaviours and dealing with limiting beliefs, (Gilligan,1997) to decouple any negative identities and rebuild a more positive core.
- Work on parts integration (Dilts & Delozier,2000) to help them associate into their core identity.
- Outcome thinking and the development of compelling goals and personal purpose (O'Connor & Lages,2005).
- Holistic balancing so that whole life is considered, rather than just work, such as suggested by Whitworth et al (1988) in their Wheel of Life model albeit with some adaptation of the labels e.g. 'romance' to become 'significant other(s)'.
- 'Let go' and lose their 'attachment' to 'I' to enable true alignment with others and real leadership.



# Suggestions for group coaching

- Needs to be strong group motivation to change.
- Need to find long term meaning in change.
- Group coaching sessions to help them reframe, recalibrate and refocus including presentation of evidence for change.
- Challenge to do individual coaching first and alongside group work otherwise 'loss of self' = 'loss of control' in the learning sets (Le Bon 1895).
- Personal Leadership Programme to transition from Silo Manager to Enterprise Leader (Charan & Drotter 2001), linking to model of excellence, reduction of limiting beliefs and move from conflict to harmony.
- Use lens of 13 components of alignment for internal benchmarking , feedback and coaching against 'CONTRIBUTIONS' framework.





## 'CONTRIBUTIONS' FRAMEWORK; *A contribution to practice!*





# In conclusion;

*“In an ever more frightening world, even comforting delusions serve some purpose when there is an emptiness within. Our partners seem to equate progress in terms of affluence, rather than personal happiness, and they worry unduly about comparison with others. The facade just about holds them together long enough to perform their current role, to socialise or to get out of an argument, a commitment and even a marriage. Maybe through your work they can learn that the past is not their potential”*

**SECRETARY TO A SENIOR PARTNER**

**22 years in same firm**