

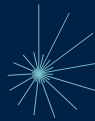
# Character in UK Law

## The Oxford Character Project

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The Oxford  
Character  
Project



JOHN  
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*Inspiring Awe & Wonder*





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## Foreword

The Forward Institute and Oxford Character Project are passionate about the role of good leaders in making the world better. We believe that leaders profoundly shape the nature of organisations – how they operate, the decisions they make and the principles underpinning them.

The legal sector plays a vital role in society, upholding the rule of law that is a cornerstone of our democracy. The smooth running of the economy, protection of individual rights, and our ability to work effectively with others—within and beyond the UK—to address shared challenges, depends on the ongoing commitment of legal professionals to undertake their work not only in the interest of their clients but in service of society. Individuals and firms must maintain the highest standards of honesty, integrity, and independence that the UK's legal system stands for. Miscarriages of justice such as the Post Office scandal highlight that these core values of the legal profession cannot be taken for granted.

This report focuses on the important themes of character and leadership in law. The idea of character speaks to the need for the values of the legal profession to be ingrained in individual and organisational habits of practice. The emphasis on leadership points to the need for renewed direction and role models if the legal profession is to fulfil its social purpose.

Of course, leadership in law is far from straightforward. The practice of the profession has been to elevate successful lawyers to senior management positions but competence in legal practice does not necessarily translate

to good leadership. And good leadership in law is a difficult task, not least at a time when leaders must navigate the disruptive opportunities and challenges of digital technologies, balance the commercial realities of modern legal practice with the wellbeing of their people, answer for the ESG performance of their firms, and find a way to attract and retain talented people.

This report makes the case that character is an important part of the story when it comes to leadership and leadership development in law. What is more, it shows convincingly that for most employees in law firms the character of their leaders really matters. Over 40% of the top 20 features of good leaders identified within UK law firms relate not to competence or interpersonal skill, but rather to character. Character, along with competence, is fundamental to any understanding of high performance leadership.

This reinforces what most of us intuitively know. But despite this, and significant work done on culture and conduct, most attempts to foster 'good leadership' in law continue to focus almost exclusively on a set of behaviours or technical competences that individuals or organisations wish to develop.

So I hope that you enjoy this report, that it stimulates your thinking, but above all that it makes a contribution to the legal sector becoming more thoughtful about how it can help foster the leadership that clients, employees, and the justice system need and that will allow the sector and the society that it serves to flourish.

**Adam Grodecki**  
**Founder & Chief Executive**  
**Forward Institute**



# Executive summary

In recent years, the commercially-focused operating context for UK solicitors and law firms has put pressure on the social responsibility inherent in the practice of law as well as on lawyers themselves. Our research suggests that law firms are lagging behind other business sectors when it comes to an organisational emphasis on values and purpose. A focus on character and culture is needed for the values and intellectual disciplines of the legal profession to be translated into consistent habits of practice.

The work of the Oxford Character Project focuses on the importance of character for leadership across contexts. Our research seeks to identify the character qualities that are most important for leaders in different settings, and how character can be developed in educational and organisational contexts.

**Survey findings:** We surveyed 464 people from across leadership levels in eight UK law firms to identify the central features of good leadership in law as it is understood among professionals in the sector. The legal professionals we surveyed identified 134 features of good leadership, related to three essential dimensions: professional competence, character, and interpersonal skills. Character is particularly important, representing 44% of the features of good leadership. However, important leadership virtues such as humility, kindness, patience, and curiosity were towards the bottom of the list.

**Interview findings:** We interviewed 34 lawyers and legal professionals at different levels in UK firms. Participants commented on the need for a greater emphasis on purpose in the legal sector and the leadership needed to move from a primary focus on profit per partner to a broader conception of high performance. Four virtues were emphasised as particularly important for lawyers to develop: resilience, courage, empathy, and humility.

Intellectual virtues—the character qualities that relate to good thinking—play an essential role in legal practice. Amalia Amaya’s work at the University of Edinburgh highlights the following as particularly important: open-mindedness, intellectual courage, intellectual vitality, intellectual patience, intellectual perseverance, intellectual sobriety, intellectual humility, creativity, and practical wisdom.

Character and culture can be developed within organisations through the application of research-based strategies. These include habituation through practice, engagement with virtuous role models, and the design of systems and structures. To focus on character in organisations is not about fixing individuals. It is about supporting people to grow in a self-guided way, strengthening the powers of perception, deliberation, and motivation that guide action. It involves helping people to be the best versions of themselves and designing organisations in ways that support rather than obstruct or undermine values and purpose.



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# Introduction

The work of lawyers and law firms holds a privileged status in society and fulfils an important social purpose. Law is one of three historic professions (together with medicine and divinity), emphasised on account of its formal educational pathway, professional organisation, and contribution to society—its proper practice is essential to maintain social trust and uphold justice.

**The interpretation and application of legal rules that is provided as a service to clients is not simply a private exchange but has a wider public impact.**

This report focuses on UK solicitors, who are required by their professional code to keep this societal role in view, practising “in a way that upholds public trust and confidence in the solicitor’s profession”.<sup>1</sup> This is the “social licence” for legal practice, a freedom to operate that is granted implicitly by society on the basis that the work of lawyers and law firms fulfils an important social purpose.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, the commercially-focused operating context for UK solicitors and law firms has put pressure on the social responsibility inherent in the practice of law. It has also put pressure on lawyers themselves, incentivising a singular focus on billable hours in a system where the primary measure of success is profit per equity partner. It is perhaps unsurprising that the industry is reporting high levels of

burnout, with one 2022 YouGov survey finding that 92% of lawyers experience stress or burnout as a consequence of their job, 25% experiencing it on a daily basis.<sup>3</sup> What is more, the unrelenting competition that has resulted has left little breathing space to engage additional challenges, which have mounted up. On the to-discuss list of partner meetings, along with the nuts and bolts of financial performance, are issues such as hybrid working, well-being, demanding client expectations, competition from American firms, the disruption and potential of AI, the importance of ESG and responsible business, the overhaul of professional education pathways, recruitment and retention of the brightest young talent.

These challenges bring the importance of leadership to the fore. They can hardly be addressed without it. However, leadership is not a natural term for lawyers.

**Exercising leadership in the partnership structure of law firms is a challenge in its own right, necessitating a consensual approach which requires high levels of diplomacy.**

Nonetheless, insofar as law firms are organisations seeking to thrive amidst complexity and overcome significant internal and external challenges, good leadership is essential.

This context raises important questions for organisations and individuals:

- How can law firms, as private institutions competing to achieve their commercial goals, remain connected with the values and goals of society that the law is intended to uphold?
- How can lawyers and law firms be the kind of individuals and institutions that practise law effectively in a challenging environment?
- How can under-represented groups whose equal opportunity in legal practice is necessary for the profession to maintain trust across society be enabled to thrive in their careers?

- What leadership is needed for law firms to successfully navigate current challenges, prioritising social purpose that goes beyond profit?

Many law firms and sector-wide organisations are seeking to engage these questions, and there is a growing emphasis on values, purpose, and person-centred leadership in law firms. Initiatives such as the O-Shaped Lawyer and tech solutions to work allocation such as Capacity are pressing for culture change and providing tools and resources to facilitate it. Industry organisations such as the Law Society are turning to focus on ethical leadership as a major emphasis.



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# Purpose and social licence

Society implicitly grants the legal practice a “social licence”, the privilege to operate on the basis that the work fulfils an important social purpose,<sup>4</sup> namely to uphold the system of justice in society. It is also important that firms themselves are equitable and just places to work in order to maintain this social licence.

## Purpose statements of law firms

The need to address major global challenges such as those reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals has brought the importance of purpose beyond profit and values beyond financial value to the fore as an emphasis in business across sectors. When it comes to organisational focus on values and purpose, our research suggests that law firms are behind the curve.

**In our recent survey of values and purpose statements of 221 leading UK firms, we found that only 13% of law firms provided a purpose statement on their website or annual report compared to 74% of financial organisations, 81% of tech companies and 86% of businesses from other sectors.**

A greater number of firms (76%) listed company values, yet this was the lowest of all the sectors we surveyed compared to 83% of tech companies, 85% of financial organisations and 97% of businesses.

This picture was supported by data we gathered from interviews with lawyers. When discussing purpose, lawyers talked primarily in terms of delivering a service for clients: “When it comes down to it, the priority is delivering for clients. That’s what we’re paid to do, and it can sometimes be a bit jarring.” Another lawyer responded that “the traditional purpose for a law firm is to deliver an excellent service to clients.”

**While law firms have a duty to their clients, the idea that the “traditional purpose” of the legal profession is reflected in transactional client exchanges—logged in billable hours and measured in profit per partner—is questionable.**

Indeed, it is this financialisation of the legal profession that seems increasingly “jarring”, not least to younger employees that law firms are seeking to retain and future talent they are fighting to attract. While the impetus to articulate and demonstrate deeper values and purpose may be coming from a new generation it brings with it an opportunity for law firms to re-connect with an older tradition of legal practice that is the source of the profession’s status and its trusted position in society.



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# Humanising legal practice

We interviewed 34 people from apprentices to managing partners at five UK law firms, mostly large solicitors firms. A prominent theme was the need to humanise legal practice. Many participants talked about the all-consuming nature of law and their lack of work-life balance. As one lawyer put it, the law is “notoriously not necessarily the best for work life balance.” As a result, “lawyers have a reputation for not being particularly human at times”.

A male interviewee commented that it is very easy to become a “weekend dad”. And in this same vein, a female interviewee reported that after attempting to return to work part time following the birth of her child, she eventually scaled back up to full time, much to her disappointment. While the firm had marketed a part-time option for mothers, in reality it equated to working nearly full time but for notably lower pay.

**The work of humanising law firms, supporting healthy work-life balance and ensuring opportunities for upward mobility for women with families is important in its own right and a necessary step towards gender parity. This is particularly salient in higher levels of leadership where the representation gap is widest.**

The impressions of those we spoke to converge with existing research. A 2022 YouGov survey of 100 UK lawyers found that nearly two thirds reported the profession as having negative impacts on their physical and mental health.<sup>5</sup> Recently, lawyers in the UK were identified as the second most stressed group of professionals, after human resources specialists.<sup>6</sup>

As a senior associate who had recently moved to in-house practice following 10 years in a magic circle firm put it in an article for the Law Society: “Law firm culture, particularly across the top firms, can be notoriously brutal. As I look back, my overwhelming feeling is that there was a degree of humanity missing: an acknowledgment of lawyers as whole beings, that we have relationships and commitments and joys and needs outside of work.”<sup>7</sup>

Is it time to step back from the financialisation of law, re-visit foundational questions regarding values and purpose, and humanise the culture of legal practice in the UK?



# Character and leadership

The idea of character has a long history in relation to the legal profession. The US legal system retains a character and fitness assessment in the induction process for new lawyers but its meaning and application have been much disputed and it is criticised as inconsistent and idiosyncratic.<sup>8</sup>

For a better understanding of character and its application to law, help is at hand in the academic study of character in philosophy and psychology, where the science of character has been gathering pace for some years. The Oxford Character Project has been studying character and leadership since 2014 and there are a number of other centres in the UK and globally. For example, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham has undertaken extensive research on character in professional education and practice and recently released a framework for professional ethics which focuses on character.

**What do we mean by character? Someone's character comprises the set of habits or dispositions that shape how that person thinks, feels, and acts. Character is stable across contexts but unlike some fixed traits of personality, it is not static. Over time, and through repeated practice, character can be developed.**

Character is also shaped by narratives that frame contexts and make choices meaningful, by the example of people we admire, and by organisational culture.

Virtues are excellences of character that relate to a specific domain or to life as a whole. Character can be broken down into moral virtues (such as honesty and fairness), intellectual virtues (such as open-mindedness, curiosity and judgement), civic virtues (such as friendliness and tolerance), and performance virtues (such as resilience and commitment).<sup>9</sup>

The distinctive feature of a character-based approach to professional practice is its focus on the person, taking account of emotion, motivation and perception, as well as action. To focus on character in legal practice goes beyond an exclusive emphasis on rules or outcomes to view legal professionals from the perspective of the personal qualities that consistently shape their performance.

The culture of a firm refers to the characteristic patterns and practices of organisational life: customary ways of thinking, relating to others, expressing (or suppressing) emotion, finding motivation, incentivising action, defining job titles, giving feedback, celebrating success, acknowledging failure, and much more. It is codified in systems, symbols, and structures that are built up over time and shape the attitudes and actions of individuals and teams.

Culture is complex but it is an important focus in organisations because it influences the wellbeing of colleagues, the ability to attract new talent, the consistency of ethical behaviour, and ultimately impacts firm performance.

Because culture is not simply a set of ideas but a web of embedded values and practices, it can be hard to shift. However, changing a culture is possible over time, particularly through the intervention and example of leaders who act as cultural gatekeepers and through policy change and regulation that reshapes the operating environment.

Culture has come to the fore across industry sectors in recent years, in part due to the increasing realisation of its potentially negative effects on conduct and behaviour. In finance, the identification of cultural factors in cases of corporate misconduct has catalysed a concern for culture that goes beyond regulation and enforcement and has led to projects such as the New York Fed's Culture Initiative,<sup>10</sup> which has sought to focus industry attention on the importance of corporate culture and ways to improve it.

In the last two years the UK's legal sector has started along a similar path. The regulation of law firms by the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) has historically focused on governance structures, systems and controls, but in 2022 the SRA conducted a thematic review of workplace culture,

identifying positive workplace culture as that characterised by such qualities as inclusivity, respect, psychological safety, regular feedback, supportive and collaborative teams, social connection, and authentic leaders who act as role models.<sup>11</sup>

The SRA's emphasis on culture is welcome and the positive aspects it identifies are important. However, to focus simply at the collective level of organisational culture is insufficient.

**Culture has a strong influence upon individual action but it isn't determinative. As Alison Cottrell, former CEO of the Financial Services Culture Board, put it: "The cultures we spend time in shape our character and our character may in turn shape the culture, particularly if we sit at the top of the hierarchy."<sup>12</sup>**

A cultural lens focuses on the social context, a character lens focuses on personal agency and responsibility. The two aspects interact dynamically and both are important, indeed culture can be understood as organisational character. If culture change is a serious priority for law firms it needs to be joined to an emphasis on individual, and especially leader character.



## Resilience, courage, empathy, and humility

In order to understand the importance of character in legal practice, we interviewed 34 lawyers and legal professionals at different levels in UK firms. Interview participants were asked questions relating to character, culture and leadership in their organisation and personal experience. Four virtues (excellences) of character were identified by participants as particularly important for legal professionals and leaders:

### 1. Resilience: positive adaptation in the face of stress and adversity

Resilience was mentioned more often than any other character quality and goes to the very nature of work in the legal profession, described by one participant as an “attritional, bruising career”. Resilience is important to learn from mistakes, handle the competitive nature of the profession, and move forward following difficult client interactions. As one lawyer said, “Clients can be exceptionally difficult and you have to face criticism with a smile on your face.” Resilience was identified as a particularly important virtue for leaders. A senior manager commented: “You’re dealing with some pretty unpopular things. No-one is ever happy with pay, no-one is happy with promotions, no-one is happy with anything that comes out, and it’s quite easy to be the butt of all jokes. So, you’ve got to be pretty resilient, and you’ve got to build a team around you, and you’ve got to have a network of people that you can sound off to. So, resilience and just not letting all those things get on top of you.”

### 2. Courage: speaking the truth and doing what is right when doing so might be unpopular, difficult, or costly

Courage was singled out with a particular emphasis on doing the right thing in the face of the difficulties and anxieties that are ever present in pressurised legal contexts. Lawyers need to issue counsel “that you know [clients] don’t want to hear”, and require the resolve to say to clients, “I’m sorry, I don’t think that’s right. I don’t think that’s a good idea.” For those in leadership positions, courage is required to have the “honest conversations” needed to effect change. And it doesn’t stop with discussion, leaders need to “put their heads above the parapet and actually make difficult decisions.”



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### 3. Empathy: understanding the circumstances and needs of both clients and colleagues

In the words of one lawyer, empathy is “utterly, utterly crucial.” This view was widely shared in our data, with empathy understood as an awareness of what drives behaviour. It involves attending to “why someone is acting in a particular way, and what their needs are.” While empathy was characterised by one interviewee as a “softer” trait, there was a strong consensus that empathy, often expressed through active listening, is an essential asset that leads to positive professional outcomes. Empathy enables lawyers to understand their clients, including their motivation, enabling them to more accurately comprehend and solve client problems. It is exhibited in a sensitivity to colleagues and the burdens they are carrying. It strengthens interpersonal connections and enables leaders to bring the best out of their teams.

### 4. Humility: recognition and positive acceptance of the limits of understanding and ability

“Humility is essential... it’s critically important,” said one lawyer we spoke to. While not as prominent a theme as resilience, courage, and empathy, many others agreed. Lawyers, they said, have expert knowledge but need to guard against arrogance, “to be careful about your ego”. Humility was also highlighted in the context of failure: “I’ve had to deal with failure a number of times... and the ability to put that to one side and have a positive spirit and move forward is key.” Humility, one lawyer said, is being able to say “hands up, we did that and we shouldn’t have.” Humility ranked low on the list of features of good leadership identified in our survey but going deeper in interviews the consensus was clear: a “more humble approach is ultimately the stronger approach.”

## Intellectual virtues in Legal Practice

Professor Amalia Amaya



**About:** Amalia Amaya is Professor of Law and Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh's School of Law, having joined the University in 2019 through a British Academy Global Professorship Award. She holds degrees in law and linguistics, with advanced legal qualifications from the European University Institute and Harvard Law School. Her research focuses on philosophy of law, with a particular focus on legal reasoning and epistemology, theories of justice, and international normative theory. Prof. Amaya is the author of *The Tapestry of Reason* (2015) and has co-authored several other volumes on law and virtue. Currently, she is developing a virtue-based approach to legal reasoning and judicial ethics, and exploring the concept of fraternity as a legal and political ideal.<sup>13</sup>

Intellectual virtues are a central component of a well-rounded professional character in law. To properly think like a lawyer, one needs to have legal knowledge and technical skills, but also a certain type of intellectual character. Intellectual virtues are critical to excel at the tasks of inquiry, interpretation, and argumentation that are central in lawyering. Thus, the 'lawyer's mind' cannot be severed from 'the lawyer's temperament': competence in law requires the possession of certain qualities of intellectual character. An intellectually virtuous character is also inextricably linked to moral excellence in the legal profession, as lawyers' epistemic conduct has momentous moral consequences for clients, the parties, and society at large.

### Which intellectual virtues are key to excellence in legal practice?

These are some traits of character that are particularly important for lawyers:

**Open-mindedness** is a lawyerly virtue that is needed to properly listen to the views of colleagues, clients, and relevant stakeholders with whom one may disagree, sometimes deeply, and to seriously consider the possibility that they may be correct. As any other virtue, it is also a mean between two vices (by defect and by excess) as it is opposed to close-mindedness, but also to gullibility.

**Intellectual courage.** Lawyers need to be intellectually courageous to be open to criticism, to be willing to challenge conventional views about the law, and to question their own beliefs about the law

and the facts, even if deeply seated, when there are reasons to doubt. In the context of teamwork, courage is also critical to contribute to a productive discussion, as it enables the lawyer to avoid self-silencing, on the one hand, and bellicosity, on the other.

**Intellectual vitality** is needed to engage in the complex cognitive endeavors that are involved in good lawyering. Lawyers need sustained mental effort to avoid facile cognitive shortcuts (i.e., biases and heuristics), to explore problems from a diversity of perspectives, to question accepted views about how to frame a legal question and come up with innovative solutions, to conscientiously examine relevant legal materials, to search for potential arguments and evidence, to actively engage in legal argumentation, and to develop their own views about the case in an autonomous way. Intellectual vitality counteracts intellectual lethargy and is critical to avoid rote ways of thinking, arguing, and doing, which imperil the flexibility and adaptability that is critical for effective lawyering. It is also opposed to excessive intellectual zeal, which results in exhaustiveness, obsession with detail, and over-activeness.

**Intellectual patience, perseverance, and sobriety** are needed in the context of lawyering to keep on investigating and deliberating, to follow a line of argument until the end, and not to give up too early and wait until all relevant arguments and evidence have been duly considered. The intellectually patient, perseverant, and sober lawyer does not prematurely settle on a view about a case,

but she also avoids dilatoriness and is able to reach a timely resolution. Thus, she hits the mean between precipitation and quietism, thereby avoiding hastiness, impetuosity, and rush, but also slowness, procrastination, and inaction, when forming a judgement about the case and advising clients.

**Intellectual humility** endows the lawyer with a disposition to take seriously the possibility that he might be wrong, to be ready to acknowledge his own fallibility and willing to change his mind in the face of new evidence and novel arguments. The humble lawyer avoids arrogance and hubris (which leads to dismiss disagreement and to endorse a dogmatic stance) as well as self-abasement (which leads to having a poor conception of one's cognitive abilities as well as to being subservient, too conciliatory, and too ready to give in and capitulate). A commitment to relate to disagreeing colleagues and clients on an equal footing is central to possessing and exercising the virtue of intellectual humility.

**Imaginativeness** and **creativity** are critical, yet underappreciated, virtues in the context of lawyering. These virtues are needed to anticipate objections to one's arguments, to think up original solutions to legal problems, to come up with insightful analogies, to interpret the law in a different guise, to conceive alternative scenarios, to devise innovative lawyering strategies, to anticipate potential rulings, and to envision the implications and consequences that follow from one's position.



Finally, **practical wisdom** is the keystone of a lawyer's good intellectual character. This virtue plays three critical roles:

1. It orchestrates the work of different virtues when they come into conflict. For instance, when the demands of intellectual courage and intellectual cautiousness pull in different directions, practical wisdom enables lawyers to do what is intellectually virtuous rather than what is intellectually courageous or intellectually cautious.
2. It helps lawyers determine the right mean between excess and defect that is the mark of virtue. For example, when doing legal research, the practically wise lawyer will know what qualifies as thoroughness rather than obsessiveness, on the one hand, and sloppiness, on the other.
3. It adjusts the demands of intellectual virtue to the distinctive features of the legal context, which has important moral, practical, and institutional dimensions. For example, the practically wise lawyer will know how to display 'epistemic generosity' in a way that respects the constraints imposed by the principle of client confidentiality.

**In sum, practical wisdom brings about and unifies the kind of intellectual character that is needed for fully complying with the standards of moral excellence of the legal profession as well as for enhancing the quality of legal services. Ultimately, it helps the lawyer achieve the end of the legal profession, i.e., the administration of justice, and to engage in the legal practice in a socially valuable way.**



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# Good leadership in UK law firms

What does leadership mean in law firms? Fee earners often assume leadership of cases and teams. Professional services staff, categorised as “non-lawyers”, enable firms to operate sustainably and successfully as organisations. Can their work be understood as leadership? What place is there for distributed leadership throughout organisations, whereby more junior members of staff are encouraged and enabled to take initiative? Does the work of leading look the same for each of these groups or are different styles of leadership necessary in different contexts?

The work of the Oxford Character Project focuses on the importance of character for leadership across contexts. Our research seeks to understand what it means to lead well and particularly the character qualities that are most important for leaders in different settings. Our educational programmes apply research-based approaches that support present and future leaders to consider what it means for them to lead in their context and develop the character qualities that will enable them to lead ethically and effectively.



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We surveyed 464 people from across leadership levels in eight UK law firms using a method known as prototype analysis to identify the central features of good leadership in law as it is understood among professionals in the sector. The method encompasses three studies, conducted with three different groups of participants, each building on the preceding study.

Participants identified 131 separate features of good leadership in Study 1, which were ranked according to their centrality between 1 (almost never true) and 7 (almost always true) in Study 2. In Study 3, central features were more quickly identified and more easily recalled than peripheral features, indicating the presence of a stable prototype (idea) of good leadership in law.



## Study 1

**Free generation:**  
Participants in group A were asked to freely generate features of good leadership in the financial sector.



## Study 2

**Centrality assessment:**  
Participants in group B were asked to rate the features identified by group A, assessing them according to their centrality for good leadership in the legal sector on a scale between 1 (almost never true) and 7 (almost always true).



## Study 3

Testing for a prototype using cognitive tasks: Participants in group C underwent a series of cognitive processing tests to establish differences in memory recall and speed of awareness between central and peripheral features as rated by group B. This enabled us to establish the presence of a stable prototype of good leadership in law.

Features are presented on page 26 in order of centrality along with the mean centrality assessment and standard deviation for each feature. Further detail of the method can be found in the technical methodology section, below. The full results and discussion will be

made available in a peer-reviewed article. The comparison between good leadership in law and good leadership in the technology and finance sectors can be found in the Oxford Character Project's Good leadership in UK business report.<sup>14</sup>



# Three dimensions: Character, Competence, and Interpersonal Skills

The features of good leadership identified by practitioners relate to three essential dimensions: professional competence, character, and interpersonal skills. All three of these aspects are important and each requires focused attention when it comes to leadership development.\*

- **Professional competence** refers to the professional knowledge, cognitive abilities, and skills that enable individuals to perform leadership tasks to a high standard.
- **Interpersonal skills** refer to the interpersonal understanding and skills necessary to perform leadership tasks to a high standard given the essentially relational nature of good leadership.
- **Character** refers to habits or dispositions of thought, emotion, and action that in their developed state are stable over time and consistent across contexts.

\*Categorisation according to professional competence, character, and interpersonal skills was conducted by two researchers who analysed the data independently before resolving discrepancies in conversation. There is significant overlap between character qualities and interpersonal skills since character has an important interpersonal dimension. However, some strengths of character may be stable traits that are only evidenced in interpersonal contexts. Where an interpersonal context is necessary for a feature to be exhibited (e.g. collaboration) we classed the feature as an interpersonal skill.

Figure 1: Proportion of features in each category

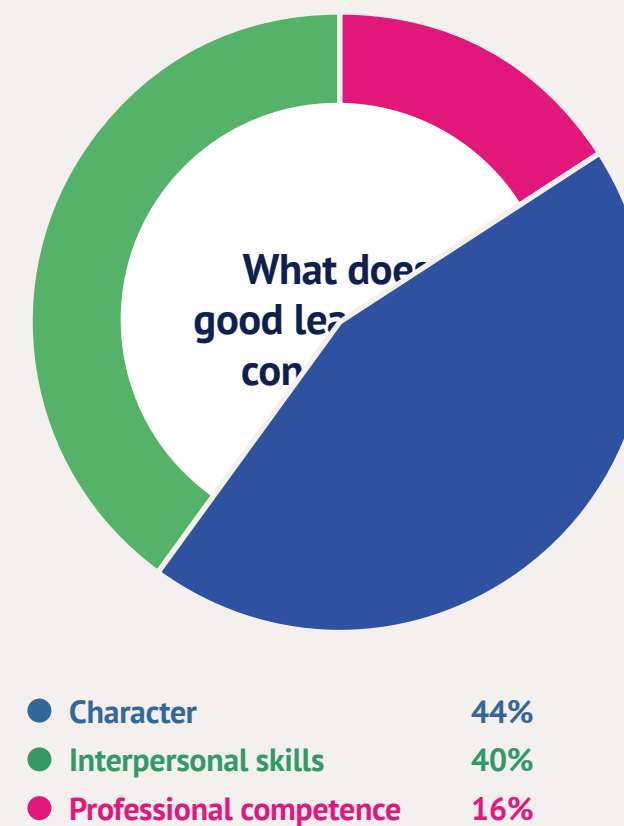
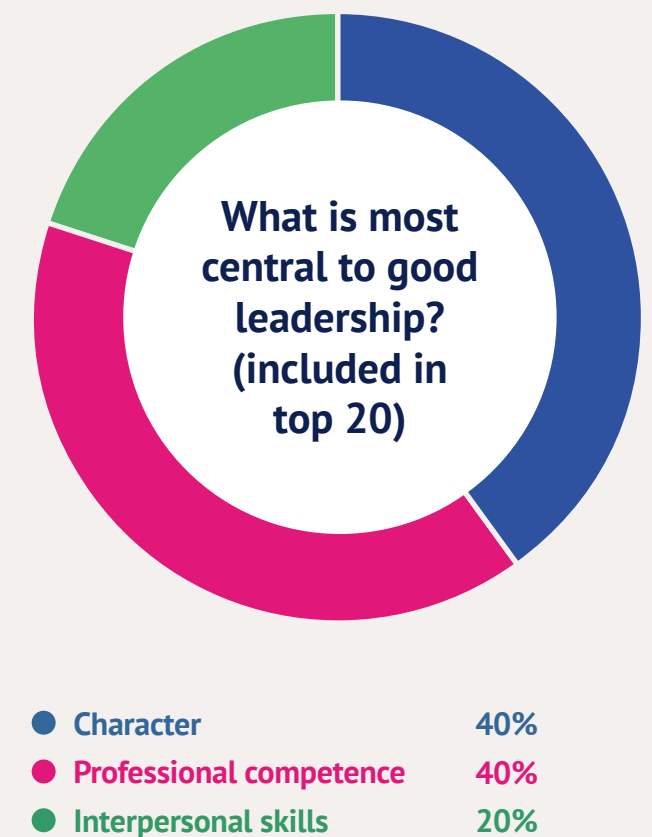


Figure 2: Proportion of the top 20 most central features in each category



Features of good leadership in UK law

	Feature of good leadership	Centrality (scale 1-7)	Standard deviation
● 1	Competent	6.45	(0.7)
● 2	Professional	6.41	(0.7)
● 3	Hardworking	6.40	(0.7)
● 4	Communication skills	6.36	(0.8)
● 5	Integrity	6.35	(0.8)
● 6	Knowledgeable	6.33	(0.8)
● 7	Responsible	6.32	(0.8)
● 8	Expertise	6.31	(0.8)
● 9	Builds relationships	6.29	(0.8)
● 10	Committed	6.25	(0.8)
● 11	Solves problems	6.25	(0.8)
● 12	Trustworthy	6.25	(0.9)
● 13	High standards	6.24	(0.8)
● 14	Experienced	6.23	(0.8)
● 15	Takes ownership	6.23	(0.9)
● 16	Intelligent	6.21	(0.9)
● 17	Provides direction	6.20	(0.9)
● 18	Commercial acumen	6.15	(0.9)
● 19	Decisive	6.14	(0.8)
● 20	Resilient	6.13	(0.8)
● 21	Common sense	6.12	(0.9)
● 22	Strategic	6.12	(0.8)
● 23	Leads by example	6.11	(0.9)
● 24	Determined	6.10	(0.9)
● 25	Driven	6.10	(0.9)
● 26	Honest	6.10	(1.0)
● 27	Client-focused	6.09	(1.0)
● 28	Focused	6.09	(0.8)
● 29	Accountable	6.08	(0.9)
● 30	Ethical	6.08	(1.0)
● 31	Has decency	6.08	(0.9)
● 32	Clear	6.07	(0.8)
● 33	Explains things well	6.06	(0.9)
● 34	Confident	6.05	(0.9)

● Character ● Interpersonal skills ● Professional competence

	Feature of good leadership	Centrality (scale 1-7)	Standard deviation
● 35	Delegates	6.05	(1.0)
● 36	People management	6.05	(1.1)
● 37	Listens	6.04	(1.0)
● 38	Proactive	6.04	(0.9)
● 39	Big picture perspective	6.03	(1.0)
● 40	Risk appraisal	6.03	(0.9)
● 41	Protects team	6.02	(0.9)
● 42	Respectful	6.02	(0.9)
● 43	Encouraging	6.00	(1.0)
● 44	Shares knowledge	6.00	(0.9)
● 45	Technical ability	6.00	(1.0)
● 46	Pragmatic	5.99	(0.9)
● 47	Prioritises well	5.99	(0.9)
● 48	Fair	5.97	(0.9)
● 49	Successful	5.97	(0.9)
● 50	Supportive	5.97	(0.9)
● 51	Develops others	5.96	(1.0)
● 52	Persuasive	5.94	(1.0)
● 53	Reasonable	5.94	(0.9)
● 54	Appreciative	5.92	(1.0)
● 55	Handles stress well	5.92	(1.0)
● 56	Responsive	5.92	(0.9)
● 57	Ambitious	5.91	(1.0)
● 58	Approachable	5.91	(1.0)
● 59	Adaptable	5.90	(1.0)
● 60	Role model	5.90	(1.0)
● 61	Visible	5.90	(0.9)
● 62	Motivator	5.89	(0.9)
● 63	Attentive to detail	5.87	(1.0)
● 64	Influential	5.87	(0.9)
● 65	Team builder	5.85	(0.9)
● 66	Consistent	5.84	(1.0)
● 67	Understands needs	5.84	(1.0)
● 68	Collaborative	5.83	(0.9)
● 69	Inspiring	5.83	(1.0)



	Feature of good leadership	Centrality (scale 1-7)	Standard deviation
70	Organised	5.83	(1.0)
71	Mentors others	5.82	(1.0)
72	Positive	5.82	(0.9)
73	Understands others	5.82	(1.0)
74	Willing to learn	5.82	(1.0)
75	Efficient	5.81	(1.0)
76	Teaches others	5.81	(1.0)
77	Enthusiastic	5.80	(1.0)
78	Time management	5.80	(1.0)
79	Future focused	5.79	(1.0)
80	Gives feedback	5.79	(1.1)
81	Human	5.78	(1.1)
82	Team player	5.78	(1.0)
83	Engaging	5.77	(1.0)
84	Understanding	5.77	(1.0)
85	Assertive	5.76	(1.0)
86	No blame	5.76	(1.2)
87	Empowering	5.75	(1.0)
88	Inclusive	5.73	(1.1)
89	Interested in others	5.73	(1.1)
90	Calm	5.67	(1.0)
91	Emotionally intelligent	5.67	(1.2)
92	Connected	5.66	(1.0)
93	Values-led	5.66	(1.1)
94	Discreet	5.64	(1.2)
95	Flexible	5.63	(1.0)
96	Open to new ideas	5.63	(1.1)
97	Balanced	5.62	(1.0)
98	Open minded	5.60	(1.1)
99	Helpful	5.59	(1.0)
100	Thoughtful	5.59	(0.9)
101	Authentic	5.58	(1.1)
102	Diplomatic	5.58	(1.0)

	Feature of good leadership	Centrality (scale 1-7)	Standard deviation
103	Challenger	5.57	(1.1)
104	Loyal	5.57	(1.1)
105	Direct	5.55	(1.0)
106	Open	5.55	(1.1)
107	Unflappable	5.54	(1.1)
108	Considerate	5.53	(1.0)
109	Self-aware	5.52	(1.2)
110	Tenacious	5.51	(1.1)
111	Takes feedback	5.50	(1.3)
112	Tolerant	5.49	(1.1)
113	Available	5.47	(1.0)
114	Empathetic	5.45	(1.1)
115	Progressive	5.45	(1.2)
116	Friendly	5.41	(1.1)
117	Compassionate	5.40	(1.1)
118	Energetic	5.39	(1.1)
119	Curious	5.38	(1.2)
120	Caring	5.32	(1.2)
121	Patient	5.29	(1.2)
122	Transparent	5.29	(1.3)
123	Charismatic	5.23	(1.1)
124	Kind	5.15	(1.1)
125	Creative	5.09	(1.2)
126	Courageous	5.06	(1.2)
127	Visionary	5.04	(1.3)
128	Humorous	4.94	(1.1)
129	Generous	4.93	(1.1)
130	Humble	4.71	(1.4)
131	Easy-natured	4.64	(1.2)

Table showing features of good leadership in UK law firms according to professionals within the sector

Undervalued virtues

Of the four character qualities identified in our interviews as important for legal practice and good leadership in law, only resilience made it into the top 20 features in our survey research. Empathy, courage, and humility are all in the bottom 20.

Indeed, the bottom of the list comprises 14 character qualities and 6 interpersonal skills. The message seems to be that character qualities such as generosity, curiosity,

patience, kindness, and transparency are presently not highly valued features of leadership in law.

Insofar as leaders conform to the prototype, there may be a missed opportunity to improve team culture and enhance firm performance. The character qualities that are not much valued are essential in order to build trust (transparency), develop and maintain positive team relationships (generosity, empathy, patience, kindness), identify opportunities and risks (curiosity, humility), and take important but difficult decisions (courage).

● 112	Tolerant	5.49	(1.1)
● 113	Available	5.47	(1.0)
● 114	<b>Empathetic</b>	5.45	(1.1)
● 115	Progressive	5.45	(1.2)
● 116	Friendly	5.41	(1.1)
● 117	Compassionate	5.40	(1.1)
● 118	Energetic	5.39	(1.1)
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● 124	Kind	5.15	(1.1)
● 125	Creative	5.09	(1.2)
● 126	<b>Courageous</b>	5.06	(1.2)
● 127	Visionary	5.04	(1.3)
● 128	Humorous	4.94	(1.1)
● 129	Generous	4.93	(1.1)
● 130	<b>Humble</b>	4.71	(1.4)
● 131	Easy-natured	4.64	(1.2)

Table showing undervalued features of good leadership in UK law firms according to professionals within the sector



Iris van Domselaar  
Oxford Character Project Law Symposium  
University of Oxford



## How can character be developed?

Character is stable but not static. It is shaped by the people around us, the cultures we inhabit, incentive and appraisal structures, and by the intentional action of individuals who seek to be the best versions of themselves, pursuing excellence when it comes to character as intently as they pursue excellence when it comes to competence.

Identifying, testing, and refining research-based strategies to develop character has been at the heart of the Oxford Character Project since our work began in 2014. Together with the Program for Leadership and Character at Wake Forest University, we focus on seven strategies for character development:<sup>15</sup>

1. **Habituation through practice:** Virtues of character are not simply ideas but habits, developed by repeated, goal-oriented action. For example, the way to become a kinder person is by repeatedly acting with kindness over time in ways that are appropriate to the context.
2. **Reflection on experience:** Experience can be character building, but the process of developing character through the ups and downs isn't automatic. It involves reflection on experience to identify opportunities for growth and move forward intentionally.
3. **Engagement with virtuous exemplars:** Role models, who exemplify virtues of character in their attitudes and actions are central to character development. However, in order for role models to be effective instructors, engagement with their example must go beyond distant

admiration to active engagement and emulation. How did they develop the character qualities we admire? What challenges did they face? Where did they fail? How can we follow them in our own way?

4. **Virtue literacy:** Building a vocabulary of character enables the identification and cultivation of virtues. Understanding and defining virtues such as humility, empathy, and courage creates a deeper comprehension which expands our moral awareness and develops a plausibility structure for new practices.
5. **Awareness of systems and situational pressures:** Character is developed in relation to cultural norms, incentive structures, and cognitive biases. Recognising pressures, incentives, and biases enables us to navigate them effectively, making decisions and taking action in a way that aligns with our values. Within organisations leaders may have the ability to influence the design of team practices, organisational incentives and structures to support the cultivation of virtues.
6. **Moral reminders:** Whether you use digital tools, wearables, or post-it notes, reminders bring values and virtues to the fore in everyday life. They can be employed by individuals and organisations to reinforce important virtues of character.

7. **Friendships of mutual accountability:** The development of character is personal but it is not individualistic. We are shaped by the company we keep. Character is developed within communities, where friends and colleagues support one another to be the best versions of themselves.

At Wake Forest University's School of Law, these strategies have been applied in a specific programme to cultivate leadership and character in law students.<sup>16</sup> They can also be used to structure experiential leadership development programmes for executives, such as those delivered by the Oxford Character Project at the University of Oxford.



*Seven strategies for character development based on Lamb et al., 2021.*

# Technical methodology

This section provides further detail of the research method for the surveys to analyse organisational values and understandings of good leadership in law.

## Good leadership survey

### Method

To explore understandings of “good leadership” in UK law firms, we utilised a method known as prototype analysis. This method is based on prototype theory which defines concepts in terms of common features held by most examples of the concept.<sup>17</sup>

Prototype analysis involves three steps that examine if a shared prototype of a given concept exists among a specific group of participants: i) features of the concept are identified, ii) central and peripheral (and in some cases marginal and remote) features are distinguished , iii) the reliability of the distinction between central and peripheral features is tested using one or more measures of information processing (central features will be remembered more quickly, and more accurately than peripheral features). Following this methodology, our research took the form of three experiments:

Study 1: Participants were invited to list features of “good leadership” in law. Features listed by participants were grouped independently by two researchers. Features were grouped linguistically (e.g. empathetic and empathy were grouped together) and

semantically (e.g. genuine and authentic were grouped together). Discrepancies were adjudicated by a third researcher to establish an agreed list of features.

Study 2: Features derived from Study 1 were presented to a new group of participants who rated their centrality on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = almost never true, 7 = almost always true), enabling us to produce averaged centrality scores for each feature.

Study 3: A third group of participants completed a series of memory and reaction time tasks to corroborate the presence of a valid prototype (the hypothesis here is that participants recall and recognise central features more accurately and quickly than peripheral features). These tests were conducted in four phases: i) an acquisition stage in which participants were shown a series of both central and peripheral features for three seconds each; ii) an interruption task which distracted participants from rehearsing the features by asking them to list, in alphabetical order, as many UK cities and towns as they could think of; iii) a recall task in which participants had to report features listed in the first phase; iv) a recognition task in which participants had to quickly indicate whether or not they had seen the feature shown in phase one. In Study 3 central features were more quickly identified and more easily recalled than peripheral features, indicating the presence of a stable prototype of good leadership in law.

### Participants

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Number of participants	129 participants from 3 firms	240 participants from 4 firms	95 participants from 5 firms
Age	22 – 66 years (M = 40.87, SD = 10.4)	19 – 66 years (M = 39.23, SD = 10.9)	22 – 61 years (M = 37.98, SD = 9.72)
Gender	59.7% female, 40.3% male	59.2% female, 40.4% male, 0.4% not disclosed	71.6% female, 27.4% male, 1.1% not disclosed
Leadership level	7.8% managers of managers, 44.2% managers, 48.1% no direct reports	11.3% managers of managers, 42.9% managers, 45.8% no direct reports	10.5% managers of managers, 44.2% managers, 45.3% no direct reports
Managed by	28.7% managed by a female, 65.1% managed by a male	31.3% managed by a female, 63.3% managed by a male	37.8% managed by a female, 62.2% managed by a male
Ethnicity	89.9% white, 4.7% mixed, 3.9% Asian, 0.85% other	91.3% white, 3.3% mixed, 3.3% Asian, 0.8% Black, 1.3% other or not disclosed	90.5% white, 1.1% Asian, 3.2% mixed, 1.1% Black, 1.1% Latin American/Hispanic, 3.2% not disclosed
Business functions	97.7% law focused, 2.3% not disclosed	0.8% finance-focused, 1.3% tech-focused, 2.1% business focused, 95.8% law focused	98.9% law focused, 1.1% not disclosed
Average tenure in the sector	15.97 years (SD = 9.54 years)	14.23 years (SD = 10.81 years)	12.16 years (SD = 8.73)
Education level (highest achieved)	3.9% GCSEs or equivalent, 6.2% A-levels or equivalent, 42.6% undergraduate degree, 47.3% postgraduate degree, 0% doctoral degree	2.9% GCSEs or equivalent, 4.6% A-levels or equivalent, 40.8% undergraduate degree, 50.8% postgraduate degree, 0.8% doctoral degree	11.2% GCSEs or equivalent, 38.2% A-levels or equivalent, 45.3% undergraduate degree, 50.5% postgraduate degree, 1.1% doctoral degree

### Research ethics

This research was conducted under the ethical oversight and prior approval of the Central University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford. All participants gave their informed consent to participate in this research.



# Endnotes

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