

7 Ways Legal Leaders Can Foster Firmwide Stewardship

By **Eric Belfi** (October 13, 2026, 1:02 PM EDT)

When people picture a law firm chairperson at work, they often imagine someone at the center of every consequential decision.

At most firms, leaders are now expected to guide strategy and revenue while also retaining talent, serving clients, improving operations, planning succession and sustaining culture. But that model is becoming untenable.

In the evolving landscape, the chair's most important responsibility is to exercise judgment about where leadership matters most and to build a team capable of leading when the chairperson is not in the room.



Eric Belfi

The 2026 Law Firm Leadership Report from The Tilt Institute and SurePoint Legal Insights makes the pressure visible. The study, which was published in August, included 155 respondents in leadership roles at AmLaw 200 firms, international practices and boutiques, from firmwide leaders to practice and department leaders.

According to the results, strategic planning was part of 89% of respondents' mandates, increasing revenue 84%, and talent retention and engagement 83%. Client relationship management, operations, succession, collaboration and culture also sat on the leadership agenda. The top eight responsibilities were separated by only 16 percentage points.

In other words, the modern mandate has expanded without a corresponding expansion of any one leader's time or attention.

That challenge crosses firm models. Although I write from the perspective of a chairman at a plaintiffs firm, the principles of prioritization, delegation, leadership development and accountability apply broadly.

For any firm, the practical question is the same: How should a firm's chair respond when the leadership mandate grows faster than individual capacity?

The answer begins with stewardship — seeing the enterprise as a whole, reserving the chair's attention for the firm's most consequential choices, and building systems that allow others to lead.

1. Maintain strategic altitude.

The breadth of today's mandate makes strategic altitude harder to maintain and more important to protect.

Strategic altitude is the perspective needed to see the firm as a whole and evaluate today's decisions against its long-term direction. It requires enough distance from individual matters to recognize how choices about clients, talent, capital and risk collectively shape the institution's future.

Lawyers naturally view the firm through the matters they are handling, the clients they know best or the practice in which they built their careers. A firm's chair must deliberately widen that perspective.

Instead of asking only how a particular matter is progressing, leadership must also ask: Where is the

firm going? What could keep us from getting there? Which opportunities deserve our resources? Where are risks accumulating across the enterprise even if each decision appears reasonable on its own?

Maintaining strategic altitude does not mean withdrawing from the business. Some matters require direct involvement because of their financial magnitude, strategic significance, reputational consequences or effect on the firm's future. The challenge is knowing when to descend into the details and when to trust capable leaders to handle them.

Leadership capacity is finite. I regularly return to a simple question: Where is my involvement the most valuable use of my leadership role?

Sometimes the answer is an important client relationship, a difficult investment decision, a senior hire or a moment when the institution needs a clear voice. At other times, the best contribution is to ask the right questions, establish the guardrails and then step back. Selective involvement makes the chair's participation more meaningful when it occurs.

2. Build a team that challenges.

No growing firm can depend on one person to make every important decision, especially when leadership now spans strategy, revenue, talent, clients, operations and succession.

The answer is not merely to distribute tasks; it is to delegate genuine responsibility and authority. A strong leadership team expands the chair's capacity because its members can translate strategy into action across practices, offices and business functions using their own judgment.

That requires trust, but it also requires candor. The best leadership teams are not collections of people who agree with the firm's chair. They share the institution's direction and values, but they are willing to challenge assumptions, surface uncomfortable facts and question a favored course of action.

I do not need colleagues who tell me what they think I want to hear. I need colleagues who tell me what I may not yet see. Constructive disagreement is not a sign of disunity. Properly handled, it safeguards against groupthink and improves the decision-making process.

The chair should make the process explicit: Disagreement is welcomed before a decision, the person responsible for the final decision explains what was decided and why, and alignment is expected afterward. Those rules allow a broader leadership group to debate hard questions without creating paralysis.

Information must also move. As firms grow, knowledge fragments just as the leadership mandate expands. One practice may see a market shift before another. A client-facing team may identify an emerging need that has not yet reached firm leadership. Lawyers handling different matters may recognize a common risk only if someone connects the dots.

Regular cross-functional review of clients, talent, operations and risk helps the team identify patterns early and keeps the firm's chair from becoming the sole conduit for institutional knowledge.

3. Treat every major case as a capital decision.

Capital means much more than money. It includes lawyer and professional time, leadership attention, matter and litigation capacity, institutional relationships, and reputation. Those resources are finite, and every significant case draws on several at once.

That is why case selection is strategy. Choosing which matters to pursue is often as consequential as how those matters are handled or litigated.

A compelling claim may still demand years of work, substantial expense and sustained attention before the outcome is known. The decision cannot be reduced to whether a case is legally viable.

The need to allocate leadership attention applies to every law firm, but it also takes a distinct form in

a plaintiffs firm. Because plaintiffs firms routinely commit substantial resources today to outcomes that may remain uncertain for years, case decisions require a portfolio view rather than a matter-by-matter instinct.

I always ask whether it is consistent with the firm's strengths, whether it serves clients well, how it fits within the existing portfolio, and whether it represents the best use of resources among competing opportunities.

The same discipline applies beyond the case docket and across firm types. Growth requires investments in people, technology, new capabilities, geographic reach and client service. An attractive opportunity is not automatically the right opportunity. The harder question is comparative: What are we choosing not to fund, staff or pursue if we move forward?

As leadership responsibilities multiply, firms need an agreed investment process that makes those tradeoffs visible rather than allowing them to happen by default.

4. Stay close to clients without chasing every trend.

As internal leadership demands expand, a firm's chair cannot allow them to create distance from clients.

Client expectations evolve, markets shift and new risks emerge. The chair must stay close enough to understand not only what clients need today, but also what they are likely to need next. Those conversations provide strategic intelligence about where the firm may need new expertise, capabilities, technology or geographic reach.

At the same time, adaptation should not become drift. A firm needs a consistent test for new investments: Will clients continue to need this service over the coming years? Does the opportunity fit the firm's purpose and capabilities? What existing priority would it displace? These questions allow a firm to respond to change without chasing every development that reaches the chair's desk.

The chair's position can open a door, strengthen an important relationship, recruit exceptional talent, resolve a difficult issue, or make the firm's priorities unmistakably clear. But institutional authority is most effective when used selectively.

If the chair's involvement becomes routine, it loses force and crowds out other leaders who should be building those relationships and solving those problems. The response to a broader mandate is to set boundaries around the chair's role, not to make the chair ubiquitous.

5. Protect the entrepreneurial core.

Growth creates strength, but it can also produce bureaucracy, slower decisions and an instinct to protect what already exists.

Especially for a plaintiffs firm, that is a particular danger because early judgment and decisive action are central to case selection and development. The entrepreneurial mindset must survive as the institution becomes more complex, but it can no longer depend on informal access to one senior leader.

Entrepreneurial thinking and institutional discipline are complementary. Firms can preserve both by defining where people may act independently, what financial or reputational thresholds require review, and how quickly an escalation will be decided. Clear boundaries allow initiative without forcing every new idea through the same bottleneck.

Culture makes that combination possible. As a firm grows, culture becomes more vulnerable to dilution and cannot be left to memory or assumed to transmit itself. Leaders must translate culture into observable choices: whom the firm promotes, which behavior it rewards, what standards it enforces, and how it responds when short-term revenue conflicts with those standards.

What leadership consistently does will always matter more than what it occasionally says.

6. Foster leadership that can stand on its own.

The case for developing future leaders is especially urgent. The Law Firm Leadership Report found that 48% of lawyer leaders had received no formal leadership training. Among those who had, 72% received seven days or fewer in total.

Firms cannot keep expanding leadership responsibilities while relying on appointment and experience alone. Future leaders need repeated opportunities to make decisions, manage people, build client relationships, learn from mistakes, and take on responsibilities that are real enough to matter.

Delegating authority carries risk. Someone may approach a problem differently than I would, and a decision may take a turn I did not anticipate. But refusing to delegate creates the greater risk that an institution depends too heavily on a few people.

A firm's chair should identify potential leaders early, give them defined authority, provide feedback after consequential decisions, and expand their remit as their judgment develops. The goal is leadership depth that can support the firm's current complexity and its next transition.

7. Measure success by what endures.

Leadership systems also need a broader definition of success.

In the Law Firm Leadership Report, 46% of lawyer leaders said they had no formal measurement of their performance. Asked how their firms measured leadership success, 48% of lawyer leaders identified revenue growth as a measure and 43% identified profitability. Only 32% reported being evaluated on talent retention and 16% on associate development and promotion.

That mismatch matters now because firms are asking leaders to deliver strategy, talent, client relationships, collaboration, culture and succession at the same time. A financial scorecard alone cannot show whether that work is being done well.

Firms should define a small set of outcomes for each leadership role and review them as seriously as financial performance. Measures will differ by role but can cover strategic progress, talent retention and development, client stewardship, succession readiness, and the quality and speed of institutional decisions.

A chair's best work is rarely solitary. Under today's broader mandate, it is reflected in the team's judgment, the next generation's confidence, and the firm's ability to act without routing every decision through one person.

Eric J. Belfi is the chairman and head of the executive committee at Labaton Keller Sucharow LLP.

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