

Is Your Law Firm a Group of Cats or Dogs?

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on October 11, 2022

Is your firm a group of cats or dogs? Probably not a question most Managing Partners have considered recently, but surprisingly apt given the behavior and hunting patterns displayed by the typical wild versions of cats and dogs.

Cats hunt as solos. They stalk their prey individually, kill it, and keep it mainly for their own benefit or for their own young, whom they teach to hunt for themselves at a very early age. They are the ultimate example of 'eat what you kill.'

On the other hand, dogs (and related animals like wolves) hunt in packs and share the benefits of a kill. They respond to strong leadership, as Mike Short noted in his 2018 post [Law Firm Leadership is Like Walking the Dogs](#), and have team strategies and benefits. Domestic dog behavior is also—usually—highly social. They like people as well as other dogs, and they like to play games, initiating playful group behavior. Most of them just want to be 'with' their owners.

Cats might like you—and even play 'with you' if you dangle something in front of them—but from their perspective, it's generally all about them. They own the place. Your primary job is to feed them, brush them, pet them...you know the drill.

It should come as no surprise then that cats and dogs are naturally antagonistic and will fight each other absent early socialization to instill different behaviors.

With these thoughts in mind, which kind of firm do you have?

If you are like most firms, you probably have a mix of 'cats' and 'dogs' in your shop. There are likely a number of partners who really are solos, or sole proprietors, whose orientation is primarily to catch and hold onto their own clients, sharing as little as possible while maintaining strict control over the work they do hand out to others. You probably also have a number of partners whose natural inclination is to build teams, work with others, share the benefits of a practice, support each other on clients...and simply trust that they will be treated fairly in the process.

Realistically, there is room for both inclinations in most firms, but the tensions between competing philosophies can sometimes be significant and can manifest themselves in many—sometimes unexpected—ways.

There is a real difference between the type of firm you build depending on if you are catering to cats vs. dogs, and how the firm is built has a major influence on how you will be perceived in the marketplace, what laterals and young lawyers you attract (and, perhaps more important, retain), and how successful you might be in implementing strategy.

Where might those differences lie?

Start with the obvious: How is your compensation system designed? Is it an 'eat what you kill' type of system that encourages holding onto clients and work, only delegating what cannot be done alone or when a specific skill set is absent? Does getting someone else to work on your clients require a negotiation around credit sharing? Do all marketing 'teams' need to have a pre-arranged deal on how credit will be allocated? Or does it encourage credit sharing, team building, collaboration across skillsets, and multiple relationships with key clients? Do partners benefit from creating client access for others? Training young lawyers to be future team members? Team marketing (aka 'let's catch the client first and worry about how the credit is allocated later')?

Where the balance of these competing demands falls says a lot about which way your firm leans and striking this balance can sometimes lead to serious tensions around the firm's compensation system and its implementation.

Next, consider how your practices are managed. Do the Practice Group Leaders (PGLs) have real authority and, more importantly, buy-in to drive team efforts and activity? Can they generate real communal activity and have some influence on the allocation of rewards? Or is the primary job of the PGL to monitor what is happening among sometimes competing rivals in the practice and to obtain resources when requested...while bothering attorneys as little as possible?

Finally, consider your approach to strategic thinking. As a firm, are you disciplined around and capable of agreeing on where the firm is going...and where it isn't? Do your partners and other stakeholders buy into the group decisions and work together to try to achieve those goals? If so, maybe you have a pack of dogs in your firm. Or is your strategy a collection of what all the individual stakeholders (or at least the most 'important' among them) want to achieve, whether those objectives are realistic or compatible with each other? If so, this suggests a clowder of cats (or an ambush of tigers or a pride of lions?). Thinking about it, even the names of these animal groups suggest very different personalities and very different power arrangements when they come together.

Both cats and dogs can be very successful, but in the legal industry there is probably a limit on how big a 'cat' firm can be and remain successful. Every firm might need its share of cats to achieve some goals and maybe focus on specialized skillsets, but successfully building real depth and scale requires cooperation and team effort, not the building of individual fiefdoms.

Unfortunately, in our lingering COVID reality where getting together remains difficult or sometimes impossible, it is harder than ever to collaborate and build team successes. The danger of culture shift (more cat, less dog) in firms where leaders cannot—or do not—keep the focus on connectivity and support for all team members remains very real.

If you want a positive trajectory (e.g., growth, better talent attraction/retention, more revenue, etc.), keep a constant focus on your culture and your people, especially while you consider any immediate business concerns and financial performance.

As the leader of the pack, it is your responsibility to ensure the firm emerges from challenging times stronger and better than it entered them.