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## Apprentice leaders

“The ultimate job interview” and “the job interview from hell” is how *The Apprentice* TV programme is billed in the US and the UK respectively.

In this middle-class reality game show, a group of young, upwardly-mobile achievers with business backgrounds in various professions compete to win a year on the coat-tails of Lord Sugar or Donald Trump, running one of the magnates’ businesses and taking a shortcut into senior management.

The qualities and characteristics that Lord Sugar and Donald Trump are searching for in the winning candidate must surely be the same ones that partnership committees and personnel department staff are looking for in prospective partners and new legal recruits. Or are they?

The programme’s makers say that the business-themed tasks the teams of contestants are asked to tackle each week are designed to test skills such as salesmanship, negotiation, teamwork, organisation, dedication and strategic thinking. These are certainly qualities that successful legal candidates would also need to display.

But, despite praise from *The Sunday Times*, which has called the programme “not just a game show; it’s a business school”, and *The Guardian*, which deemed it “a salutary lesson in aggressive buying and selling, hiring and firing”, the television show also lauds less admirable character traits such as confrontation, aggression, backstabbing, bullying, boasting, credit-stealing, blame-laying and loud shouting behaviour.

### Impact on associates

The primetime airing of *The Apprentice*, combined with its serious treatment by quality media and industry trade publications alike, creates a risk that the characteristics and conduct rewarded by the show will become a behavioural blueprint that ambitious associates will mimic.



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There are many common threads linking *The Apprentice* and life in a law firm. On the programme, teams are assigned a task and directed by a project manager. In a law firm, associates are assigned to a deal overseen by a partner.

The nature of much legal work is project-based and lawyers are expected to work around the clock to get the job done. On the programme, at least, this sleep deprivation results in desperate decision-making and poor judgement and adds to the car-crash entertainment factor.

Aspiring associates are expected to show leadership qualities: having a personal impact, building a personal profile, developing personal networks and have strong interpersonal skills. Like the candidates on *The Apprentice*, lawyers need to navigate the internal structure of the group in order to have a voice when key decisions are made, build contacts within the group by judiciously contributing to the success of others to win support and silence detractors, and generally create a robust personal brand.

On the show, this manifests as skulduggery, with backstabbing and cynical game-playing – after all it is a competition!

The flat pyramid structure of many law firms means that a large number of lawyers are chasing a smaller number of promotional opportunities – competition is fierce. In common with the apprentices, lawyers need to stand out from the crowd. Apprentices attempt to achieve this by making a spectacle of themselves: dictatorial decision-making, intimidation and other forms of loud and boastful behaviour.

*The Apprentice* – to make a more entertaining programme – focuses far more on winning the task than the means of gaining that success. Consequently, apprentices are aggressively competitive, try to steal the credit for successful actions, acrimoniously lay the blame on each other and typically fail to listen to good ideas from their colleagues in order to appear decisive and ultimately hog all of the glory.

Whilst *The Apprentice* has been criticised for focusing too heavily on sales as a skill, this chimes with the legal market, where rainmaking is a key attribute for aspiring partners.

### Learning curve

The huge pressure on candidates – both on apprentices and lawyers up for promotion – can bring out either the best or the worst in people. The trick for law firms is to devise a structure of training and support that encourages the best behaviours. The competition element of the television show, combined with the battle for ratings, means that *The Apprentice* brings out the worst in candidates.

There are plenty of opportunities for lawyers to pick up the wrong messages about what makes a person successful from watching this programme. But it is more likely they will pick up the right messages from the apprentices’ incompetence and errors. <sup>mp</sup>

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