

Pioneers and Pathfinders: Carrie Fletcher

(This transcript was generated through AI technology.)

Steve Poor

Hi, this is Steve Poor, and you're listening to Pioneers and Pathfinders.

On today's episode of Pioneers and Pathfinders, we're delighted to welcome Carrie Fletcher, a leadership development expert, lawyer, and longtime force for change in the legal profession. With more than 30 years of experience, Carrie's work spans leadership workshops, executive coaching, consultancy, and thought leadership. As the global head of faculty at O Shaped, she works with law firms and legal departments to reimagine legal leadership through a client-centric, business-focused lens. At Cambridge University's Møller Institute, Carrie helps global professional services leaders strengthen their leadership and strategy skills to achieve greater impact. She delivers master's level, team-based leadership programs at London Business School and collaborates with faculty there on leadership research and case studies. Carrie also serves as an affiliate instructor with Harvard Law School's Executive Education program, working with partners and emerging leaders around the world.

In our conversation, Carrie reflects on how leadership development in law firms has evolved, what she's learned from working across global markets, how O Shaped equips lawyers for modern leadership roles, and the skills lawyers need not just to succeed, but to thrive in today's profession.

I am talking today with Carrie Fletcher, who is one of the most experienced and respected leadership development professionals working around the legal profession today. Carrie, thank you so much for making the time. It's nice to meet you.

Carrie Fletcher

It's nice to meet you too, and I'm really excited to be here. So thanks for having me.

Steve Poor

Great for you to join. You've been involved in leadership development and legal profession now for a number of decades. Let's start at the beginning. Why law school? Why become a lawyer?

Carrie Fletcher

Oh, gosh, I appreciate you've kept it vague in terms of the number of decades, because I reflect on that sometimes and I think, Wait, that can't that math can't be right. So why law school? So I grew up in a really small town in Michigan, went to University of Michigan for undergrad, was a political science major. So like many people in that field, am I actually going to be a political scientist?

Steve Poor

You know, that's that sounds like me. I was political science major, and suddenly I realized there weren't jobs as political scientists.

Carrie Fletcher

Yeah, like, who knew? And so but actually what happened was, and I don't even know if I've told the story before, so when I was in undergrad, I had a job at a small law firm in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and it was three lawyers who worked together, who one of them did a bunch of plaintiff civil rights work, one of them did a bunch of family law work, and one of them did a lot of criminal defense. So it's strange mix. And I started as a secretary, and then began doing sort of more paralegal type functions, and that's actually why I decided to go. They were all doing very different types of work, but really having

impact on people. And I don't know if I would have defined it that clearly, but when I got in so I then went to law school, also at the University of Michigan, and I, when I got there, I realized there were sort of a shocking number of people who were not there because they actually wanted to be a lawyer, but that it was sort of, it was more where I had been after being a poli sci major and thinking, Well, I guess I should just get a graduate degree. But then, actually, I had this experience that made me think, Oh, the one I should do is law, I think because I'm an idealist at heart. So I thought, I thought it would matter somehow.

Steve Poor

I think a number of us thought that when we went into it and it does matter, that's an interesting grouping of practices that you started working for. I don't think I've ever heard quite that combination before.

Carrie Fletcher

Yeah, it was a fantastic. I'm still in touch with them. Yeah, it was just a fantastic experience.

Steve Poor

So you practice, you did private practice for a decade or so, and then you moved into professional development, yeah, why that move? Why that transition?

Carrie Fletcher

So that so in my career, is this great story that, in hindsight, hangs together and just this really thoughtful and organized seeming way, which is not at all the thing that was happening in real life. So basically what happened is, so I came out of law school, went to Chicago, practice, I think I told you this at a firm called D'Ancona & Pflaum, which does not exist anymore, but has been folded into your shop.

Steve Poor

Yeah, I know that. I know those folks well.

Carrie Fletcher

And I so I did a little time there, and then a very brief did it another Chicago firm, Neal Gerber and Eisenberg and then moved to Boston. So I ended up I was a commercial litigator, did copyright, trademark, trade secrets, litigation stuff, and worked in this incredible team at Foley & Larder in Boston, who I am also still in touch with today and through a series of events, I can't even remember exactly what happened, but I got put in touch with someone called Scott westpall, who at that time was building a professional development function at Goodwill Proctor, and he was a lawyer, but had been in McKinsey for a number of years, and this thing was being modeled on what they were doing in McKinsey, which was very different than what we were doing in law firms. And so I just kind of fell into it. I thought this sounds so interesting, all of these things I love that I'm doing in my sort of good citizenship time in the law firm are actually an entire job by themselves. I mean, this was early, 2000s right? So at that time, it was shockingly cutting edge that we would devote time, resources, energy to helping lawyers develop skills that were not technical, legal skills with like people were not doing that. So it just seemed really exciting to me. And so I just thought, well, I should give it a go, and see what happens.

Steve Poor

You know, it hasn't been that long ago, at least talking to an old man who doesn't seem that long ago, but you're right. It's a it's a fairly recent skill set development program that's been emerging in the profession. Why do you think it took so long for this to begin to emerge as a important characteristic of law firms.

Carrie Fletcher

So this is the part where I will feel like I'm picking on lawyers, but I feel okay doing it, having spent most of the last 30 years sort of inside, in some capacity at large law firms.

Steve Poor

We pick on lawyers all the time. On this show, it's not a big deal.

Carrie Fletcher

This is, like a weird thing about lawyers, where you pull together a set of typically really smart, really dedicated professionals, high value on brain power and intellectual rigor and all of that really interested in solving complex problems for their clients. But I would say, I mean, I've been saying this now for a long time in law firms, we are often a decade, two decades behind other professional services firms in terms of how we manage and build talent, and part of the reasons that law firms have done really, really well with a lot of really bad habits, but they are successful, right? And I'm talking about the business of law firms, not the quality of practice, which obviously has to be successful for the business to be successful. So we have that thing. And then we have organizations that are run as partnerships, at a point where that is an absolutely unfeasible model for running an organization, and yet it still works. So we bring all of these lawyers who are not trained in other disciplines to run the law firm, and then the law firm turns into a business that sort of needs the other things that a business needs to run well. But I mean, it hasn't even been that long since we've had CEOs, COOs people, Chief People officers in law firms, right? So we have set up this other model run by lawyers who have possibly a little more hubris than maybe we should about our ability to do all of the other jobs that are not lawyer.

Steve Poor

That's a shocking take.

Carrie Fletcher

I know, right? So that's how I think we got there, because we just tend to think we know all of it, and so that's why I think we're we are a little behind. I mean much, massive strides right, made in the last stretch of time, but we're still pretty far behind.

Steve Poor

As you look back over it, you've been involved in leadership development since the early 2000s. And you talked about, sort of the progression of the connection between leadership development and the profession? What's the state today? Where has the evolution taken us in the business of law these days?

Carrie Fletcher

So I guess I would say I have kind of two key thoughts on that. One is that I think we are sort of better than we've ever been in terms of law firms really thinking about people development, business literacy, being commercial. People skills, human skills. I actually hate, hate, hate the term soft skills, which is sort of demeaning of this critical set of skills. So professional skills, human skills. So in that way, it's pretty common now in law firms to have, at all different levels, some kind of expected learning around those human skills and those business skills. At the same time, I would say in particular, our talent appraisal, advancement remuneration systems have not caught up, right? So I spend a lot of time talking to firms about core leadership skills and collaborative skills and how to have motivation and engagement in your teams. And I'm talking off into a set of equity partners who are saying, No, we agree with that, but like, that's not what's rewarded in our organization, and those things all take time. And you know, I been heralding the death of the billable hour coming to my third decade of being like,

the billable hours gonna fall at some point. So I've been wrong about that, but we don't reward the things that have to happen. So even when people are trying really hard to do that stuff well, there is always a pressure of client demands, hourly demands, whatever it is. And then there is this piece, which I think most of us in law are probably not just working for the paycheck, but there's still a very real thing that when your organization rewards a certain behavior, that is the behavior that tends to be done.

Steve Poor

That compensation reward system, you're absolutely right. It's a real problem in terms of changing behavior and changing the way people collaborate with each other. Have you had success getting people to rethink their criteria for the compensation system?

Carrie Fletcher

Yeah, I have. And so in my world, you tend to see these things. They're sort of like flavor of the year. Like, what is the thing everybody's talking about this year? And I would say for 2025 it's been high performance culture, right? Most law firms I work with want to talk about high performance culture. They're probably using that language already, but creating a high performance culture is a lot more than saying we do high performance or we do really excellent legal work. And I think the thing that I have seen it, but it's complicated and it's a process, and so that's why I think it feels very difficult. So a lot of firms have figured out how to get that part of it that right, which is that you've got to have some stringent metrics about finances. You know, if you, most of us are still on the billable hour model, right? So they've got it. There's got to be some rigor in the system, where, if we have a set of established standards, people need to be hitting those standards to continue to advance like that's all fine. But the second thing that has to happen is there has to be in this as I'm saying, it has to happen if you want to be a genuinely high performing organization, there's got to be an articulation of the behaviors around leadership and management and human skills and collaboration. The behaviors have to be identified and the behaviors have to be measured and rewarded, and this is where, and that's kind of the second piece, or I don't care what order you do the pieces in, but this sort of financial metrics piece has to happen, and this human behaviors piece has to happen. They both have to have measurable standards, and then we have to actually do the measuring. And a lot of this falls apart after people do the part about setting minimum targets or whatever they're doing on kind of the what feels like the more number-y side. And so I often have, you know, I just had someone say to me recently on a program, you know, that all sounds good, but we can't, we know we can't really measure engagement. And I'm like, I just want to smack my head on the wall. I'm like, you know, every organization that is not a law firm understands how to measure engagement. It is totally measurable. But because we don't bring in outside experts the way we should, we don't look at tools like outside of our industry. We don't do that. So it feels hard to lawyers, because lawyers are not familiar with doing it. But, you know, bring in any organizational behaviorist, they'll say it's very straightforward to measure something like that.

Steve Poor

It's always been fascinating to me, the profession. And you've hit on this a couple of times. It's connection, or it's failure to adopt practices that other businesses have the ability to measure engagement, for example, the leadership development, the you can go on the list, use of technology. Why do you think that is?

Carrie Fletcher

I think it's a few things. One is that, again, this thing I said before, we have as a profession, just an incredible level of hubris like that. We just because we tend to have a lot of really intelligent people, we can figure anything out, and so we don't even think to check somewhere else, like if someone's done this, or it's been done in some way. So there's that piece, and then there's the piece that, you know, law firms are phenomenally successful, like, we have this ridiculous sort of year over year improvement in

financial performance in a way that that is not normal, but that is now the expectation. And so I feel like often my job is like, how am I getting people to Why do they want to do something different? Because also the stuff I'm suggesting, if you're talking about organizational shift, it's quite a lot of hard work, like it's a big investment of time and money and work, and you know, everything is going pretty well, so it doesn't feel like an emergent problem. And then, I guess the last thing is, there's an interesting piece around change management, because any change process is a change right? Change management is an actual thing that people have studied and are really well versed in and it has to follow. I don't care which model you use, but you have to have a system and a process for doing all this stuff in law firm. Same thing on strategy, right? Do a lot of strategy work with firms. I'm just like, No guys having articulated a strategy, that's the easy part, right? You can't then just send around the PowerPoint of the strategy or the change management aspirations, and then say, Okay, everybody, here you go, just go do this. Because even where people think it's pretty, they read it and they say, Yeah, that sounds great. That's really reasonable. They don't do it right. So there's this other missing piece about how do we change human behavior in the context of an organization that requires experience and knowledge that we don't usually have in law firms, not never. Some firms do have it and do it really brilliantly, but a lot of firms don't.

Steve Poor

You've worked in a number of countries, and you've worked with lawyers all over the globe. What differences do you see in the cultures of law firms in different countries? Is it different working with UK lawyers than it is US lawyers in this context, in the leadership development context, or lawyers, pretty much lawyers, wherever they are?

Carrie Fletcher

I would sort of say kind of both. So I see a lot of I would say the differences are more sort of scale and type of firm than place where the lawyers are. But there are obviously cultural differences anywhere you go, right? So whenever we're talking about behaviors around leadership, that you have to sort of have a cultural overlay on that of, what are the social norms in what are the organizational norms wherever you are? So that piece is always there, and you have to be sensitive to it. I see a lot of commonality. I mean, a bunch of the programs I do, you know, I do work with law firms where you've got Global Equity Partners all being put through the same type of leadership training in groups that are intentionally mixed from all regions, so that we are trying to figure out how to speak a common language, but also talk about what's different. And then I think, depending on the state of the firm, you feel that, because some things feel different, people are almost prone to highlight the differences, right? So I do some work with a number of firms who have sort of UK US presence, and there's often a sensitivity on one side or the other. And America doesn't want to be told what to do by the people in London or like people in London. Don't want some people out of New York telling even if it's not fundamentally different. So I think it's both. But I would say in terms of sort of how people show up in attitude, big impact of the type of firm that they're in, but also some impact of whether, I mean, I will say, as somebody who lives in the UK, in some ways, I feel like the US has exported, like the worst of American law firms, to London. Like the London market has changed massively. I've only been there eight years, but moving much, much more toward this high comp, high hours, high pressure model. And at the same time, I feel it's like a lot more civilized, like it often quiets down a lot in London, and people take a holiday for two weeks, and they're not expected to always be online. Not every firm, but lots of firms. I have some work in Australia, and, you know, I have to try to arrange some meetings and things. I'm going over there in the in what is our. Springtime, and everyone said, okay, look, nobody's gonna meet. Be able to meet with you basically in January, because it's summer holidays and people are not working. So yes. So that's like a very rambling answer, but a bit of both, I think.

Steve Poor

So let's move to your current role. You're head of faculty at O Shaped. Tell us about O Shaped. Explain the concept to a skeptical lawyer.

Carrie Fletcher

So O shaped is it is a UK based project company now, and I began working with them right before the pandemic. Got introduced to the founder, Dan Kane, who's the founder and CEO. The story of how it came to be was somebody who knew me said, oh, you should meet this guy, because I think he's doing stuff that would be interesting to you. And he was. Hence, you know, five years later, I'm deeply embedded in O Shaped, but fundamentally, what we're doing in O shaped is really thinking about closing the gap between law and business. So everything we do operates out of a very client centric lens, but we have quite a heavy focus on all of those sort of human and leadership skills alongside critical commercial skills. Dan the founder, his background is that he was in private practice for a number of years, then was in Network Rail in the UK and a GC function. Also spent some time sort of living and working in the business of Network Rail, which gave him a really different insight into the experience business colleagues would be having when dealing with the legal team. So we do a bunch of kinds of work, but sometimes it's working on that gap. So if we're working with in house teams, how do they deliver a better service to their business clients in the company? But the gap is the same for outside law firms dealing with their their inside clients. It's really relationship heavy, and it's probably not the kind of stuff people typically do for and with their clients.

Steve Poor

Let's pull on that thread a little bit. What are the skills or mindsets that O Shaped emphasizes that lawyers often overlook.

Carrie Fletcher

O Shaped is the, you know, our sort of naming devices, this concept of the five O's, right, which is sort of five kind of mindsets and values that that all happen to start with O. But, you know, it's sort of broader speaking. When you think about what are we trying to do there, we tend to bucket things into categories. So the first piece is about relationships, right? Like really understanding relationships. So I will say lawyers tell me all day long that this is a relationship business, right? Like you only get clients if you've got a relationship, you get referrals from a relationship, you get repeat business from a relationship. And then I'll say something like, Okay, I accept that. So think about how you train your young lawyers. How much time do you spend helping them develop the behaviors and skills that are critical to developing and sustaining deep relationships? And the answer is almost none. Or if I say compared to what time you invest in helping them get technical legal skills, what percentage of time is spent on, like the core relationship skills, it's not very high, right? Because we tend to think of relationships as like, you've kind of got a good relationship, or you don't, or maybe as you get more senior, you're making kind of more intentional outreach. So that's part of what we talk about, which is really, really fundamental stuff around trust and reducing self orientation and building better rapport and getting sort of under the skin of your clients. So there's a big, big piece of that relationship, and that's kind of the human skills piece that's very, very behavioral. And then the sort of another piece is just the concept of creating value. So what is creating value? It's not necessarily what we think it is from the law firm side. So do you have to deliver? Deliver an accident, legal source? Of course, right? Everybody will say nowadays, that's table stakes, right? You're never going to differentiate yourself in a crowded market, which virtually all legal markets are, by being a really good lawyer. There's another really good lawyer. If you go they can hire that one. So what else do you have to do? On top of that? There has to be a level of commerciality and understanding of what are the problems your clients trying to solve, and why are they trying to solve them? And this is where we run into this tension again, with the billable hour, because some of that work is not billable, like really getting to know and understand your client, like you can't necessarily hand back an invoice after you've spent time getting to know them. And then

we also do this thing in law firms where we will have sort of value add things I'm saying that within with air quotes, right, inverted commas that are maybe not valuable to the client, right? So, so what actually does it look like to create value for your clients in addition to doing excellent work? So we spend a lot of time sort of thinking about value from the client perspective. And by the way, these are often programs that are clients and law firm people together having this conversation. And then the last bit is just about being, sort of being adaptable, right? Like, how do we in this increasingly fast moving world? How do we help people develop skills around flexibility, adaptability? Which is not always a strong suit for lawyers.

Steve Poor

I'm curious, particularly in the relationship bucket, one of the things the profession is struggling with is how to train and develop lawyers in an age of generative AI. We've had this, you sort of put your finger on it. We've had this apprenticeship sort of model where people sort of learn by osmosis. There's no direct training, there's no direct development. And they over a period of years, we think they're going to develop wisdom by looking at thousands of documents in discovery, for example, that work is likely to be peeled away. It's being peeled away now, and so has your model changed to take into account the impact of generative AI. Should it change? Is it going to change? Or, if not, how does this help firms create lawyers with judgment, with ability build relationships with with wisdom?

Carrie Fletcher

So I'll give another lawyerly answer, sort of, it depends, and yes, and no. Oh, come on. I know you're shocked, right? When I was in business school, I went to business school at the London Business School, and we you joke, right? Like every time you ask them a question, the answers, it depends. Or you put it into a two by two matrix, which business school people love to use a two by two matrix for anything. So look, all of that stuff is, is really critical and we think about so I would say the same skill set that I've been thinking about since the early 2000s as have many other people, it is doubly important today, right? Because this AI picks up a lot of what we would think of as the sort of basic or rote work. Those opportunities for organically developing the skills around people are shifting. And I just read something recently that was saying, you know, the apprentice model is dead. And I was like, I don't know about that, yeah, like, the apprentice model as most of us knew it. I mean, I was a baby lawyer in the 90s, right? And then in the mid to late 90s, that model doesn't exist. But where I think we need to figure out how to make a change is how then do we account for that? So the truth is, the apprentice model was breaking down way before Covid and way before generative AI, I mean, with the stuff I was doing as a very young lawyer. I mean, for example, how many times did I sort of walk by the office of the partner I was working for, and he would wave me in because he was on a conference call, and I would sit and listen and learn and see what they were doing. Or if I had a partner who was on trial, you can bet that I was tagging along and sitting in court for a half a day, or a day or two days and watching what happened. Somebody was taking a deposition. I was a junior lawyer. I was expected to sit in the deposition for one, two, however, many days, and everything wasn't built to the client, but we also didn't have the same pressures around realization, utilization and billable hours, so we stopped doing a lot of that stuff at that level, in the 2000s for sure. And so, already, we're taking away the opportunities for organic learning. And then you add in AI, the issue is kind of back to the first thing I said, like these other skills about human relationships, building and creating trust, what breaches and breaks trust? How do you get to really know what matters to someone else, whether it's a personal organization, those are all behavioral skills that can be taught, but they can only be taught if we prioritize and value and reward teaching them. So I think it becomes even more important in today's world that we are equipping our young lawyers with these skills. There was an article recently. It was in the UK. I can't remember where it was, but PwC is now doing what they're calling it resilience training, right? But sort of saying we've got these people coming in who are not showing the same set of skills we would have seen before, and we're going to do this training. I don't like tying it to I don't think it's anything about being resilient. In fact, resilience is somewhat off putting, because I think most young lawyers

experience that concept as the firm wants to get us fit for purpose so they can grind us down by, you know, a 2500 hour year. But there is something very real in the stuff PwC is doing about the development of these human and relationship skills in a serious, you know, research backed academic way, which I think is the path we have to do as the other opportunities shift rapidly because of what's happening with AI. I mean, in a world where everybody is learning and doing so much with AI, the human skills become a massive differentiator for lawyers within their organizations, and as compared to other organizations, they're the things they're going to help you keep the relationships that aren't the backbone of your business.

Steve Poor

No, I think that's right, and you're absolutely right that the apprentice model has been breaking down long before generative AI. Has the importance, I think we all recognize the increasing importance of the human skills... Has that increased the receptivity of lawyers, whether they be in house or in private law firms, to invest time in leadership development? To you talked earlier about, how much time do you spend in developing human skills? And the answer is, zero. Has AI created a mind shift change that facilitates that more or not?

Carrie Fletcher

I would say, not yet, but I think it will. I'm optimistic that it will. I mean, part of it is that again, we're just coming in conflict again, with the challenges of the billable hour focused model. I mean, one of the bad I don't know if. Is that one of my friends says this all the time, and I'm sure he didn't come up with it. But this kind of tagline, lawyers sell expertise, and they charge for time, and I'm like, that captures the whole thing, right? If you call me up and I use some phenomenal advice in the course of 30 minutes, that saves you half a million dollars in your business, the value of that advice cannot be point five like that can't be right, right. That's not the value. So I think we're going to have to think about value more broadly than time. So there's an immediate tension there, because I work with lots of lawyers who would love to spend more and more time on this stuff, people, development, stuff, human skills, trust, relationships, winning and earning clients, but it's not rewarding the organization. So we sort of have to deal with that piece. And then I think the other then I think the other piece is that we have a lot, there's a whole generational thing happening right where I'm Gen X. Much of law firm leadership or Gen X right now, and we are quite prone to a bit of, you know, look, I walk barefoot in the snow, uphill both ways to get to work when I was a baby lawyer. And so everybody ... that's the test of whether you're committed, and so there's a whole other conversation to be had about that topic. But I think the thing we need to do is that, look, it wasn't it was a challenging job being a lawyer, and there were times when I did not love every minute of it, but I fundamentally loved that job. I wouldn't work with lawyers all the time if I hadn't gotten enormous personal value out of being a lawyer and serving my clients and doing intellectually challenging work and working with teams of great people. But the piece we have to figure out is, sort of what, what was the magic of that, right? So, because we were sitting in a conference room eating dinner at seven o'clock, or because people were there until some crazy hour and working until 2am and sort of forging these bonds, it wasn't the fact of being in the office just with other people, right? There's some other thing we were doing with people that helped them learn and be connected and be engaged, and we need to pick that apart, because it's not just a matter of mandating come to the office four days a week if the other thing is not happening. And so that's the part where I think we would do well to be sort of more curious about what are we looking for from people, and why and how do we as leaders, help them want to do it? So I don't think we're there yet. But I do think the thing with this industry, in a way, is that we don't tend to make shifts until our back is pulling up the wall. You have some organizations. I know that Seyfarth has been one. You guys have been doing all sorts of Lean Six Sigma and things way before anybody was talking about that stuff in law firms. So it's not that no organizations are doing this, but if I speak broadly on the topic, I think that we tend to act once our back is against the wall, which is not optimal, but until we feel a real sense of panic, like the junior pipeline has shut down because we're doing so much stuff with AI and Gen Z are less interested in the thing we

offer. That's okay for a while, and we need lawyers to be the equivalent of mid levels or senior lawyers, and we don't have them. So I, I think it will shift, but not quite yet.

Steve Poor

They're interesting times, aren't they?

Carrie Fletcher

Yeah.

Steve Poor

Carrie, we've we've run out of time. Thank you so much for sharing your insights. We'll have links to O Shaped and your LinkedIn profile in the show notes for those who want to follow up with her. Thank you so much. You're doing some cool stuff. Let's stay in touch.

Carrie Fletcher

Yeah, definitely. And thanks for having me. And yeah, I always love to talk about this stuff, but I also love the topics you're covering in the podcast. And it's so many things that just matter to the profession. So thanks for all the work you're doing on that.

Steve Poor

Thanks for listening to Pioneers and Pathfinders. Be sure to visit thepioneerpodcast.com for show notes and more episodes, and don't forget to subscribe to our podcast on your favorite platform.