

# Pioneers and Pathfinders: Fifth Anniversary, Part II

(This transcript was generated through AI technology.)

## **Steve Poor**

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

Well, as I said last week, this episode brings my role as host of *Pioneers and Pathfinders* to a close. It has been a wonderful five-year ride for me with fascinating guests sharing intriguing insights on the past and future of the profession. I've learned an enormous amount from each of them, and I appreciate their contribution to what are important dialogues about the future of the profession.

There are others I'd like to thank as well. To all of you who have listened in to the conversations, thank you. I know the demands on your time and to think you would make space for this podcast is humbling. I'm very grateful. To my producer over the last few years, Ethan Lapitan, thank you. Producing this podcast would not have been possible without your hard work and intellectual contributions. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Finally, a shout-out into the void to the great, late Molly Porter, who left us too soon. She was there at the beginning—encouraging, collaborating, producing. Without her, the podcast would never have happened. Molly, I hope you're looking down with a sense of pride.

As for me, I've done my best to bring you interesting people sharing insights from the profession we all love. I hope you've gotten some value from it. The podcast will be on a brief hiatus as the new team plans what's next. In the meantime, I wish you peace and serenity as we all navigate a rapidly changing, chaotic world.

And now, we wrap up with the second part of my conversation with Lorie Almon, Seyfarth's Chair and Managing Partner. Stay strong, and as always, thanks for listening.

Lorie, let me turn the tables on you a little bit. You've been chair of the firm for two years. What has surprised you most about that role?

## **Lorie Almon**

Oh, that's a really good question, maybe how much I enjoy it. You know, not every day.

## **Steve Poor**

I was going to say, wait a minute.

## **Lorie Almon**

Not every day, not every minute, but it's energizing and exciting to see this team of people. Maybe I'll take this sports analogy and see you've got this, this really good team, but you see this possibility to go win the championship and to go play at an even higher level. And when you see people coming along and buying into a plan and a vision. It's really exciting and it's really a lot of fun to do. There's been a lot of external surprises. Some of the things that have happened in the last couple of years for particularly last year, were definitely not in my playbook. So those were surprising, but that also led to another really nice surprise, which is the community of law firm chairs, and actually, particularly women who are sitting in the law firm chair role, how much a group of people who are competitors, and obviously, many ways, we're all trying to represent the same clients and recruit the best talent, and often, sometimes the same talent, but it's been a community of people who are just fundamentally, by and large, good people

who are supportive of each other and trying to do the right thing in a somewhat volatile, unpredictable time for both the legal industry and the world. So it's the kind of thing that I really do feel grateful most days, not all days, but most days, to be in this position.

**Steve Poor**

What experiences has shaped your approach to leadership? I know you focus on innovation consistent with the firm's history and culture and excellence in legal services and the values of the firm, but sort of what experiences have you had that have sort of shape the way you approach this job?

**Lorie Almon**

It's a good question as well. Certainly like you, I could say it's some of it is the people who I worked with over the years. You know, I had the, I had the pleasure of of working with you when I was an associate and you were a practicing lawyer, and remember that very well. And being part of some of the early leadership teams where we were trying some of these wacky ideas out. I remember Jeremy Sherman inviting me to be on the labor and employment leadership team when he became chair of our Labor & Employment Department, because you had become Chair of the firm, and he was one of the people who led the Labor and Employment group after you, and we were completely restructuring the department and rethinking a lot about how we approached the practice of law, and he was one of the smartest people I still have met today, but just led with this quiet confidence and compassion and the leadership was never about making Jeremy look good. It was about making everyone else look good. He led from the back in a lot of ways, but was an incredibly effective leader at the same time. I'd say also, I started out way back when working for the government, before I came to Seyfarth and literally had 100 cases at once. I didn't have a secretary. If the copy machine broke, I had to learn how to fix it. You know, there was no you were handed a red weld and told you how to trial in a few days often. And so I think that taught me early on that having some resilience in in this profession, and that it'll all be okay and if the judge isn't happy with you, or even if you don't have as much time as you would like to prepare something, if you really just try your hardest and give it your all, often good things results. And then I guess finally, as I think about it, I had a lot of experiences as a woman, graduating law school decades ago, where I was often the only, you know, the only woman at a MDL hearing where there were 50 lawyers representing clients, appearing in front of the MDL judges, and realizing that one thing stood out. And you know, it was indoor or not having worked for female partners, or not having being the first female partner in the New York office of our firm, or things like that. I think I really deeply appreciated the importance of inclusion and of allies, because so many people who didn't necessarily look like me or weren't a mom invested in me and gave me the opportunity to bring my true self to work, didn't tell me don't be a mom or those things don't matter. And so people like you and like others, allowing that culture of inclusion is something that I really try to bring to how we lead today. Because you want to get all the best talent and get the best out of everybody who works there, you have to make it a place where people can be their true selves.

**Steve Poor**

Yeah, well said, listening to you talk about oftentimes, being the only woman in the room. It reminds me, you mentioned Jeremy. He told an interesting story. He's probably told this to you. They had a case down in Tennessee once there was a race discrimination case, and he came in and Jeremy, for those who don't know, Jeremy, was white and Jewish, and he came in and his client was black. Opposing lawyers were all black. The judge was black. The courtroom was he literally was the only white person in the room. And he said it was a life changing moment for him, because he finally understood from real experience what it was like to be the only woman in an MDL room. Our black colleagues sometimes being in a room with only white people. That culture of inclusivity is really critical.

**Lorie Almon**

It really is. I feel proud of how crystal clear that is to Seyfarth's partnership times where there's there's some cloudiness around that for some

**Steve Poor**

What are your biggest leadership challenges? Now you've touched on a few of them.

**Lorie Almon**

Ah, let's see. Well, I think the external changes we've gone through mean you have to learn to lead and get people engaged, sometimes in different ways. You know, the pandemic was enormously impactful on how we work and where people work, and you touched on this. And I couldn't agree more that the most humanistic qualities are what's going to be the most important if all you're good at is locking yourself in a quiet, little office and doing research, well then you better worry about AI, because it's pretty good at some of that stuff, and it's only going to get better. But to your point, it can't form relationships. It can't earn trust. It can't tell when somebody's lying, it can't help you make a really difficult decision. It's more ... it does analysis, but it doesn't have judgment, and judgment is fundamentally what our clients are looking for from us, and you need to earn their trust. So that means you need a culture where you teach and train and enable that, and there are some tensions in that. And so I think we've figured out that we have to be incredibly purposeful about our culture. You can't just say we have a nice culture and hope for the best, because if you do, you will see some people stepping back and not really engaging in the way that you need to both develop those humanistic skills and also, frankly, to drive innovation. Innovation requires collaboration and trust. You got to trust people. You have to feel trusting that you can try something and it will fail and you will not be in trouble. So I believe firmly that maintaining that culture, it's it's a challenge. It's not at all an impossible challenge, but you have to be really purposeful about it.

**Steve Poor**

It's hard though, isn't it?

**Lorie Almon**

It can be. Yeah.

**Steve Poor**

Yeah, the dynamics you talked about. Has that changed the way you think about lateral candidates or new lawyers coming out of law school, or who you're bringing into the firm? Has that changed your criteria?

**Lorie Almon**

I think yes is the answer, maybe slightly differently depending on which group of attorneys you're talking about. I'm just a big believer in the importance of grit and resilience, and particularly when you really can't predict the future, but what you can predict is who's going to handle things. There was a, I'm speaking of quotes that you butcher. There's a Duke women's basketball coach gave a speech that's viral right now about stop waiting for it to not be hard, but just get better at the hard. I'm butchering the quote. She does it far better, but the point that she makes really resonates with me, which is that you have to figure out who's going to be good at the hard and is going to embrace the challenge and lean into the challenge. I had an experience once one of my son's baseball games, and he had a coach who would talk about, you know, you have to do today, what others won't, and do tomorrow, what others can't and my son wrote that on the inside of his lid of his baseball cap, because it motivated him, but I think it motivated me maybe even more. So I'm looking for those people who are willing to do today what others won't, so they can do tomorrow what others can't, because I think that is what makes you a success as a lawyer.

**Steve Poor**

Are you finding that more junior lawyers are having an impact on the way you think about the profession, the way culture is shaped? I mean, they're more technologically savvy, they're more mobile, they're more ... they're more in a lot of ways.

**Lorie Almon**

Yeah, I mean, we have five generations in the workplace now, and nothing's ever true completely. Of every generation, there are people who are old souls or young souls, no matter, no matter what demographic group you're talking about. But there are differences by and large, and that's why we start trying to be very purposeful. I do think it's interesting. I had assumed that junior lawyers would be the ones who would lean hard into AI and truly embrace it, and that the partners who type with two fingers would be the ones I couldn't bring along, and it has turned out not to be the case actually. I think in part, because the more senior lawyers understand the difference between the work that's at the top of their license and what's a little bit more, like word processing, and feel confident in their judgment and their ability to discern when AI is useful and when AI isn't, and when you haven't been practicing for a long time, maybe it's a little harder to know and have confidence about what good legal work or accurate legal work should look like. So I think what's neat is that means that the younger lawyers, by and large, may be much more facile with the technology, but they're not as confident in their ability to trust their results. The more senior lawyers might not be by and large as facile with the technology, but they're more confident when they get the output, and so they're learning from each other, which is something I didn't entirely expect, but see as a really positive outcome.

**Steve Poor**

I hadn't thought about it that way. That's so interesting to the younger lawyers. I've recently taught a couple of law school classes, and I get a lot of questions about, what's the future in law what's going to happen to law firms? What's going to happen to us in our careers? Not just what I ought to be thinking about, but literally, are there going to be any jobs? Do you or your other colleagues you're talking about running law firms confront that issue internally?

**Lorie Almon**

Yeah, I think we do. I have the sense. We've seen this from our incoming summer classes since generative AI has been broadly used by lawyers. The legal education system does spend a lot of time scaring law students, I think. There are some law schools that are excellent exceptions to this, but the majority, I would say, say, either using AI is cheating or AI is going to take your jobs. And so that leads to nervous law students, summer associates and junior lawyers. You know, pretty soon we're going to have lawyers who had generative AI in place the entire time going to law school, which is remarkable to me. We're going to be there soon where it was always present. And so, I think they are concerned. We have a summer program really focused on AI, as of course you know. And you can see the evolution in their thinking after the 10 week program, because they start seeing what AI legal tech tools can do, but also what it can't do, and where their opportunity is. I don't think it's going to replace all the lawyers. I think it'll replace some lawyering, but it's the opportunity to do the best part of being a lawyer and to work at the top of your license. And so if you sort of embrace how AI is going to make your job better as a lawyer, and look at it through a lens of optimism, you can get pretty far. It's challenging, though, because that's not necessarily the message that junior lawyers are getting in law school.

**Steve Poor**

No, it's not, and there's a lot of jibber jabber in the profession about that may be true for some lawyers, but the volume of those lawyers is going to be much lower, and I think that scares younger lawyers as well.

**Lorie Almon**

Yeah, sure. Part of one thing to think about is the demand for legal services versus the lawyers available to do it. They're not in sync with each other. There's huge swaths of our population that don't have access to legal services at all, or very inadequate access. And so the idea that there's just nothing left for lawyers to do seems overblown to me in a lot of ways. But, you know, look, some firms were very, very pyramid shaped, but quite a wide bottom of that pyramid. And might law firms start looking a little more barrel shaped or diamond shaped? I think yes. I think yes is the answer to that. Seyfarth has probably always taken the idea from the founders that partners are working lawyers and that you have pretty lean teams on things. So we've looked something between a barrel and a pyramid for a while. So I don't think it has as much impact as it might on the firms that used to hire 200 first year associates, and two of whom may partner, but I think for those firms, it may have a broader impact.

**Steve Poor**

We've been talking a lot about generative AI. How do you see generative AI impacting the profession over the next few years, or as far out as you want to take us?

**Lorie Almon**

Yeah, well, I think law firms need to be very purposely thinking about what clients are going to need from us and how the firms are going to deliver that, and what does a successful law firm look like in a time when AI can do quite a lot of things? So it's a hard question to answer, because the pace of change right now is so extraordinary that I think I have something figured out, and then four months later, whatever I think I have figured out is obsolete and there's a new thing to think about. But if I, if I step back and really think about it, are you building the culture that you need for this tech adoption? Are you thinking about delivering value to the client constantly, always? Is that always your touchstone when you're making decisions. Are you still tying to your values? I think that actually is incredibly important, because your people need to trust you, and they need to know you have their back and that you're going to be transparent and honest as things change. So your values and your culture are still really important. What it's going to look like? It's hard to say, but it will hopefully be a time when we are letting people work at the top of their license and doing the most exciting and important work, and we're also helping clients answer previously unanswerable questions. That's the most exciting thing to me. Lawyers would like to think that they knew everything there was to know, and that they shared all that with their clients, but that is not remotely true, and there's so much more that we could be doing in terms of delivering insight, providing analytics, helping them figure out, risk, reward, making the right choices, and that's enhancing our human judgment. So my hope is that we're tapping into all this information and analytics that we didn't have before, and then combining them with those historical fundamental traits of having good judgment and earning trust and using good judgment.

**Steve Poor**

You talked about the pace of change, and I agree with you and the impact of technology, it's easy to become paralyzed by the different options in this maelstrom of products and demands from clients, demands from partners. You know who said, Well, I know a guy over at x firm that's using X program. We need it as well. Why? Because they have it or vendors calling up or ChatGPT is going to go from 5 to 5.4 in a week. You can't be paralyzed, and firm is not paralyzed. How do you balance the strategic investment necessary, where you're balancing risk and innovation and doing something now versus waiting possibly forever. How do you approach that particular problem? Because that's a maybe not a unique problem over the years, but the speed at which things are changing and the number of variables are certainly different now than anything I experienced.

**Lorie Almon**

Yeah, that's the needle to thread. Right? You don't always jump at the shiny new object, because there will be a shiny new object again the next week and the next week and the next week, but that you don't get stuck with something and refuse to see the opportunity. I think we are doing a pretty good job of piloting quite a lot of things, but not immediately jumping in to buy every little new, shiny toy. You also have to, I think, have the strength to make your own judgment. It's one of the things I see that the AI companies build on this is, over half the legal profession is using x. And then you think, Oh, I must be the fool if I'm not using x. We need x too, and that's tempting. I get it because you can get insecure about your choices and Geez, you know, I don't see what X does, but maybe that's just me. You have to have the confidence and the patience to make sure you really see and understand the value and be willing to think you might have it right when others don't. You have to have the confidence in the patients to do that, so we're trying to thread that needle. Our labs team is enormously helpful at teasing out what's valuable and what's not. You also have to involve a lot of people. It's too much for any small little group to do it, and so having a lot of people who in a structured, thoughtful way will talk about value, talk about how something's useful to them and at the same time, not allowed a wild west approach, where everybody who a vendor finds somewhere is suddenly piloting their own tech product because that would probably be the end of the sanity of our IT team if we do that. So we have to, we have to balance. There's another piece, though, to what you're saying that I think is really important, and that the overall piece can be really exhausting. I think this is just an exhausting time for a lot of people in a lot of ways. Tech is part of it, for sure. So we're really purposeful about thinking about, how do you ensure people are performing at the highest level, but they don't burn out, and they don't crash and burn, and don't find this all too overwhelming to really function and get paralyzed by the whole thing. So one of the things the firm's doing is, you know, is we've been partnering, actually, with a group of sports psychologists to train our leaders and train our team members or associates about, how do you unlock your greatest potential at that intersection of high performance and well being? Because you need, if you're an athlete, you know, to perform at your highest level. You also need to have your downtime and regroup. You can't run the sprint 24 hours a day, right? You go to do your workouts, and you sprint and you train and you take good care of yourself, but you rest and so trying to find that sweet spot where we unlock our highest potential and still have the well being, where we can sustain this pace of change is really important.

### **Steve Poor**

So what's going to define a successful law firm five years from now?

### **Lorie Almon**

I think it's going. To be a few things. One, and I've said it already a couple of times, I'm repeating myself, but think being really clear on what your values are and holding fast to them is incredibly important. You need to have some foundational grounding in who you are. In a time of great change when you have to make these difficult decisions, it gets a lot easier if you know that you have these values that you don't compromise. And at the same time, though, you need to be highly pragmatic, right? You need to be willing to learn and recognize there's always lessons to learn, and be willing to pivot and change and grow. And so if you find that spot where you were both grounded in your values and grounded in your culture, but also willing to grow and evolve and change, you're going to be well poised for the future. Then if you think the law firms that will really succeed will have to have a vision, you have to be able to keep people aligned towards a new and hopeful future, and it's really important that you lead with optimism towards a vision that people can articulate and see. And then on top of it, you need to be able to stick it out and execute on that too. Your point you made earlier about how you stood up and said, I'm just going to keep talking about this as long as I'm chair, really resonated with me, because you can't be changing your strategy every three minutes. You have to have these core, fundamental strategic goals and a vision that everyone can see and articulate, and then you execute on that vision based on the environment you're in, and you listen and learn and evolve, but you don't take your eye off the prize.

**Steve Poor**

The prize, of course, is client service.

**Lorie Almon**

100%.

**Steve Poor**

So, how do you stay in touch with changing client expectations? How have the conversations with clients change from your you asked me the question, I'll turn it back and ask you the same question, How have your conversations with clients morphed over the last couple of years?

**Lorie Almon**

Yeah, I mean, it's all about the clients at the end of the day, isn't it? Client Service is one of our core strategic priorities, one of the central to our vision. It's central to our core values. And so you have to live that. You don't just say it, so you really have to live it. And so what that means is listening and talking and having conversations. To me, it's a lot about continuous dialog and transparency, because we're in a time where there's a lot of things in tension, right, that the clients are under a lot of pressure to cut legal spend, to add value beyond being a cost center. And I think we're in a unique position to be able to not only demonstrate efficiency without sacrificing anything about the top tier quality we're delivering, but also being able to say, and here's the insight, we can help you give back to your business and show that you are very much a value add to the business, that you're a participant. And so it sounds very simple, I guess, but a but I think it's fundamentally true that it's about staying in constant communication and listening and getting feedback and having that trusting relationship where your clients will tell you what they think.

**Steve Poor**

Absolutely, well, Lorie, we're at time. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you making the time in your schedule to talk today. It's a very unique moment in time for the profession, both because of external forces as well as internal changes, technology changes, and the firm is very fortunate to have you guiding it through these changes. It's going to be a great thing to watch. So thank you.

**Lorie Almon**

Well, Steve, we couldn't be more grateful to you. I often ask myself, "What would you do?" when I'm not sure how to handle this situation? And I'm just so grateful that I can ask myself that question, but I can also ask you that question. So thank you for the many years of guidance and support and for the wisdom that you have delivered to the entire legal profession, which is now on this innovation journey with you. They started a little bit behind you, but you've got a lot of people now in the boat so thanks for being willing to get it going.

**Steve Poor**

Thanks, Lorie.

**Lorie Almon**

Thanks you.

**Steve Poor**

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