

INTERVIEW 101: When Did "Type A" Become "Too Much"?

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On a recent Thursday night in October, my colleagues and I were enjoying an evening at the Harvard Club in midtown Manhattan. After hearing about a subject of continual value for anyone even remotely involved in the legal placement world, we left the club that evening with our minds full of substantial subject matter ripe for discussion over a nice pasta dinner in Times Square. Somewhere between the breadsticks and linguine, however, our subject matter drifted from ethics to performance to motivation. What motivates people to perform ethically? Rules? Instinct? Morals? What motivates people to perform, period? I was still thinking about this issue as I hopped on the local uptown train and headed home to sleep.

In the morning, I awoke to find *The Wall Street Journal* sitting in its usual place on my doormat. The front page, however, featured an article on the exact topic I had been mulling over the night before: motivation. It was as if the world was trying to tell me something. The article asked the same kinds of questions I had asked myself. What motivates people to perform, ethically or otherwise? What motivates people to perform at their very best? George Anders, the article's author, addressed corporate America's recent rejection of typical "Type A" executives as motivational speakers in favor of the "every man (or woman)" who has beaten back some great obstacle (be it physical or otherwise) to achieve success. In short, the article insinuated that "years of scandals and strategic zigzagging" have soured lawyers, executives, financiers, and ordinary business folk on the traditional image of the captain of industry as a pack leader and motivational presence. Instead, people are looking for new kinds of leaders to propel them toward teamwork, high performance, and ethical standards.

I found this topic of discussion to be immensely curious, as earlier that week I had been reading the Law Office Management & Administration Report (LOMAR)'s November newsletter, when I came across an article of some interest. (LOMAR typically covers daily management concerns relevant to law firm administrators, office managers, and others; it is published by the Institute of Management & Administration, Inc., on Park Avenue.) The newsletter featured an article entitled "How to Weed Out Those Least Likely to Succeed." I expected to read warnings against hiring slackers, candidates with questionable academics, or candidates with unproven track records. Instead, I found an article that, simply put, warned against Type A candidates. In short, the article suggested that Type A candidates might not be the best motivators, the best team players, the most ethical employees, or the best long-term candidates for law firm or business success. An argument *against* hiring Type A workers? I actually had to read the article twice to make certain I was understanding it correctly! In no uncertain terms, the author surmised that Type A candidates "might bring more drama than your firm bargained for...." The article was based on findings of a recent study by the Hay Group at the McClelland Center for Research and Innovation, which were first reported in a *Harvard Business Review* article, "Leadership Run Amok: The Destructive Potential of Overachievers."

See [Top Ten Interview Questions](#) for more information

The LOMAR article and its *Wall Street Journal* counterpart were of immediate interest to me, as I had recently begun seeing a bit of a trend (or, rather, instances) in the [legal recruiting world of law firms](#) questioning the hiring of typical Type A associates, law firms questioning whether Type A candidates had the power to motivate and inspire others as well as themselves, and law firms questioning the long-term value of traditional Type A overachievers. This past year, two of my best candidates, classic Type A overachievers with impeccable credentials, lost out on job offers. I would be lying if I didn't say it shocked and surprised me. Why did they lose out? The firms found them to be "too much." Although clearly skilled, with flawless academics and firm histories, they were just "too much." I began asking, "Can someone please define 'too much' for me?" When I could not get any straight answers from the firms that made these assessments, I went looking for answers and found some very interesting facts.

The Potentially Destructive Power of Type A Personalities in the Law Firm Environment

In the past, law firms traditionally liked to hire Type A personalities because they believed that they possessed, among other things, the strongest likelihood of becoming long-term practice leaders and motivators. According to the Hay Group's contributing authors, however, while overachievers have the potential to greatly stimulate organizations, they also have the potential to engage in ineffective and sometimes unethical leadership by "focusing on the end to the exclusion of the means, and becoming coercive and demanding, destroying morale and motivation...." The Hay Group's findings suggest we should celebrate a different kind of leader, a kind who "recognizes that their own drive can often diminish their impact as leaders." In summary, the Hay Group found the best leaders are those who "aren't out there blindly setting a blistering pace themselves and demanding the same from others.... Instead, they take a step back, create the vision, set the direction and standards, and then coach and engage others." Such leaders aren't defined by their own inexhaustible work ethics but by the "nature in which they motivate others to find their own autonomy and the clarity required to perform at their best."

If you are guessing this is a new theory, guess again. In the spring of 2000, *Harvard Business Review* published a similar discussion by Daniel Goleman entitled "Leadership That Gets Results." The crux of Goleman's discussion is that the most effective leaders are not necessarily Type A personalities, who tend to have very narrow leadership styles. Instead, they are people who use combinations of six distinct leadership styles, each stemming from different components of emotional intelligence. According to the article, these styles are: (i) the coercive style (coercive leaders demand compliance), (ii) the authoritative style (authoritative leaders mobilize people toward a common goal), (iii) the affiliative style (affiliative leaders create emotional bonds and harmony), (iv) the democratic style (democratic leaders build consensus through participation), (v) the pacesetter style (pacesetter leaders expect excellence and self-direction), and (vi) the coaching style (coaching leaders develop people for the future). According to Goleman, the amount of difficulty one has utilizing all six styles with flexibility based on given environments directly relates to the degree of one's emotional intelligence, which is the ability to manage ourselves and our relationships effectively. In quick summary, it seems that Type As often utilize only one or some of the above leadership styles but not all of them, rendering them ineffective long-term leaders. Goleman posits that leaders in law and business should be encouraged to grow their emotional intelligence levels in order to effectively incorporate all six styles into their leadership approaches.

Does all of this seem like psychobabble? Some will argue that these theories are more applicable to the corporate world than they are to the legal world. While perhaps somewhat true, any fool knows that the corporate world and the legal world are Siamese twins, forever destined to remain together while struggling to disconnect. More to the point, the corporate world is fast becoming the legal world. As more and more firms adopt corporate-inspired managerial models, they are also looking to the corporate world for hints on hiring, leadership, and curbing attrition. Thus, while Goleman's and the Hay Group's studies may at first seem obscure and irrelevant to law firm hiring, the fact that the ideas Goleman published in 2000 are currently being taught to students in Columbia University's Executive M.B.A Program (class of 2008), and that the Hay Group's article is being quoted as an item of interest for law office management and administration in LOMAR, tells me something. There may be something to this. If both the corporate world and the legal world are taking this issue seriously, as a [legal recruiter](#), I cannot ignore the philosophy it encourages.

And neither can law firm economists. Bruce MacEwen, a fellow Manhattanite and long-term law firm consultant on the economics of law, posits a similar thought: "'[C]ommand and control,' however appealing it is to Type As in charge, is equally demoralizing and dispiriting to Type As you're seeking to manage."

Why Are Law Firms Second-Guessing the Value of Type A Candidates?

It is possible that Type A candidates are encountering some resistance due to two very glaring factors: (i)

recent ethical scandals and related investigations in both the corporate and legal worlds and (ii) continuing increases in law firm attrition rates. If a Type A candidate is viewed as having a personality "prone to ethical lapses," he or she is going to seem suspect to anyone interviewing candidates in the current climate of ethical investigations. If a Type A candidate is viewed as someone likely to alienate and dispirit, he or she is going to seem suspect to anyone interviewing candidates with the goal of curbing attrition.

A recent article in *The American Lawyer* states that the annual attrition rate for [U.S. law firms](#) is much higher than the 19% reported by NALP. If attrition rates are climbing, firms must combat attrition, and one way they are doing so is by engaging in selective and/or *enhanced* recruiting. "Selective recruiting" means that **firms are taking more time and putting in more effort** to find candidates who are the best people for the jobs *and* who can ultimately reduce turnover. Being selective may mean weeding *out* Type A personalities. Now that does not mean that Type As must start getting nervous; in my opinion, it will be a long time before somebody closes the door on the theory that a Type A is always the best performer. However, it does mean that Type As should start being more aware of how they perform in job interviews and the messages they wish to send to prospective employers.

I vividly recall the message I sent to employers not so long ago. In early 2004, I began interviewing for positions with smaller, more intimate firms. After seven (yes, seven) interviews with one particular firm, I received a call from the hiring partner informing me that I would "not be getting an offer, as, by and large, some members of the legal team found [me] to be 'too on.'" To this day, I have no idea exactly what "too on" meant. In my enthusiasm to appear intelligent, driven, and goal-oriented, did I come across as alienating? Dispiriting? I was perplexed, dismayed, and could not believe my ears because, in my own eyes, I was a textbook team player and effective leader (the perfect dual-sided associate). I never forgot that phone call. In fact, I can honestly say that it grated on me for some time. How could I, a typical, hardworking Type A, be wrong? Shouldn't a firm want someone like me? For a long time, I ignored the logic behind that call (which, I read now, is a classic Type A habit). However, when earlier this year two Type A candidates of mine lost out on their job offers for hauntingly similar reasons (they were "too much"), I started to think that maybe, just maybe, there was a lesson to be learned here.

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As I read more and more articles extolling the virtues of being, at worst, *anti*-Type A or, at best, cautiously in favor of hiring Type As, I find that writing this article serves two purposes. First, I wish to bring to light a possibly emerging national mindset in the law firm hiring community. (Let's hope it's temporary.) Second, I would like to encourage typical Type A candidates to recognize the pros and cons of their personalities and adjust their interview skills accordingly. 10 years ago, or even more recently, the value of a Type A associate was presumed and went unquestioned. Today, as firms struggle to lower attrition, improve associate happiness, and insure themselves against ethics investigations, I expect to see my Type A candidates fielding more and more questions addressing teamwork and their abilities to collaborate, coach, balance, and inspire others.

See [Interviewing Tips](#) for more information

Interviewing styles and questions change as the market changes. When the economy is booming, Type As are "all the rage" and everyone wants to hire them. When the market becomes plagued with scandal, upset, and turnover, [legal hiring](#) managers become more selective. If you are a self-proclaimed Type A and you see descriptions of yourself in this article, it is not too late to modify your **[interview style to achieve success](#)**. Coming out with guns blazing in a typical Type A, Clint Eastwood fashion may not get you the job. However, arriving on your horse discretely packing heat but prepared to talk before dueling may confirm that, although you have a lot of Clint in you, you also have a lot of Jimmy Stewart. And *that* is what may get you the job.

See the following articles for more information:

[Top 23 Law Firm Interview Tips: How to Excel in Law Firm Interviews](#)

21 Major Interview Mistakes to Avoid at All Costs

The Best Way to Prepare for a Job Search and Interviews

How to Talk About Other Interviews in Your Interviews

How to Answer the Tell Me About Yourself Interview Question

How to Answer the Do You Have Any Questions for Me Interview Question

Had a Great Interview But Have Got No Response to My Thank-You Emails

What Does It Mean if I Haven't Heard Anything Back from an Application/Interview in a Couple Weeks?

What to Wear to a Lunch Interview?

How to Effectively Interview Lateral Candidates: Pointers for Law Firms

The Interview Post-Mortem: Don't Forget Your Thank You Notes!

The Secret to Effectively Sharing Concerns about Your Current Employer without Committing the Most Common Interview Blunder

How to Conduct Yourself During a Lunch Interview