

Enthusiasm Is Legal Leadership Differentiator In AI Era

By **Alexander Calfo and Stacy Hambleton** (November 14, 2025, 1:04 PM EST)

By mid-2025, Harvey — the leading AI-driven legal platform for law firms — was valued at over \$5 billion, underscoring the rapid acceleration of artificial intelligence in the legal sector.[1] Courts, meanwhile, have continued to sanction lawyers for unverified AI citations, signaling heightened scrutiny of how these tools are used in practice.[2]

The profession is navigating change and pressure at once. The differentiator is not only which tools firms adopt; it is also how leaders guide their teams through that change. At the center of that guidance is something deceptively simple: enthusiasm.

The Psychology of Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm is not cheerleading. Rather, enthusiasm is a sustained, authentic energy that motivates teams and drives engagement. Unlike cheerleading, which can be performative or fleeting, true enthusiasm is rooted in genuine conviction and purpose, making it a unique driver of organizational culture.

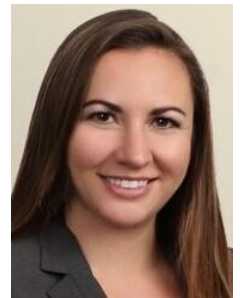
Decades of behavioral research explain why enthusiasm works — not as a personality trait, but as a psychological mechanism that shapes group performance. Three frameworks in particular illustrate its impact:

- Emotional contagion shows that mood spreads quickly across groups — when leaders bring visible energy, others unconsciously align with it, amplifying engagement and reducing resistance to change.[3]
- The so-called broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions demonstrates that positive emotions expand cognitive bandwidth and improve problem-solving — critical when issues are complex and timelines short. These emotions don't just make people feel better; they also make teams think better, fueling creativity and resilience under pressure.[4]
- The warmth and competence model, also known as the stereotype content model, explains why enthusiasm builds credibility: It signals both care and capability at once, creating trust that accelerates decision-making and strengthens collaboration.[5]

For lawyers, the stakes are immediate. A trial team that feels engaged performs differently under pressure — whether at counsel's table or in the war room. A group that feels curiosity rather than dread



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approaches a new tool with open eyes. And a client who senses conviction, not fatigue, decides more quickly to trust the advice in front of them.

Unlike confidence or composure, which can fray under sustained pressure, enthusiasm regenerates with use. It is self-reinforcing: The more it is expressed, the more it circulates, creating a durable guardrail against burnout.

Making Enthusiasm Visible

In law, visible energy must be intentional and disciplined — not dramatic or performative. It's about consistent actions that set the emotional tone for the team and drive engagement.

Below are practical strategies for legal leaders to translate enthusiasm into tangible results, each rooted in real-world scenarios.

In Trial

Begin each post-court debrief by highlighting specific moments of excellence — whether it's a cross-examination that shifted the narrative, a pivotal document admitted or a well-timed objection. This approach reframes the team's effort as meaningful and forward-moving, rather than exhausting.

Go beyond simple praise: Ask team members to share what they learned from the day's successes and setbacks. Invite junior lawyers to explain how a particular win was achieved, fostering ownership and collective learning. Use visual cues — such as displaying the winning exhibit or replaying a key video clip — to anchor the team's sense of progress.

When setbacks occur, address them openly, but pivot quickly to what the team can control next. This discipline in tone-setting ensures that the group remains focused on growth and mastery, not just survival.

In Practice Groups Adopting AI

Today, nowhere is leadership enthusiasm more critical than in AI adoption. Lawyers know the tools are coming, but many worry about risk. The leader's role is to set the tone: AI does not replace judgment; it supports the lawyer's work so that judgment can be applied where it matters most.

When leaders express curiosity, such as by saying "let's see how this tool handles a first draft," teams are more willing to engage. When they show benefits — reducing a two-hour task to 20 minutes while preserving oversight — teams lean in. And when they insist on standards, including independent verification of citations, client disclosures and controlled environments, teams trust the process.

Leaders must genuinely believe that AI is both powerful and manageable. That belief is what convinces skeptical associates to experiment, and cautious clients to accept efficiency gains.

And the psychology applies here too. Fear narrows attention; curiosity expands it. Teams that are led with enthusiasm are less likely to default to avoidance and more likely to experiment carefully, which is exactly what responsible AI adoption requires.

In Client Strategy Sessions

Transform preparation meetings into collaborative workshops. Leaders should frame each pitch as a chance to showcase the team's expertise and creativity. Invite contributions, and recognize them in front of the group. In addition, use storytelling — share examples of past successes where innovative thinking led to client wins.

When facing challenging client demands, emphasize adaptability and resourcefulness. Remind everyone that each challenge is an opportunity to demonstrate value and deepen client trust.

In Mentoring

Senior lawyers should demonstrate genuine investment in developing junior talent. Provide specific feedback on growth areas and celebrate concrete achievements. Create opportunities for associates to lead portions of meetings or present research. And publicly acknowledge these contributions, reinforcing a culture where initiative and learning are valued.

Also, share your own career stories — both successes and setbacks — to model vulnerability and perseverance. This transparency builds trust and motivates younger lawyers to pursue excellence.

Over time, these moments accumulate into culture: People expect to contribute, improve, try and verify. That expectation, once set, becomes self-sustaining.

Guarding Against Burnout

The legal profession often treats burnout as a structural issue to be solved by programs or policies. While those initiatives matter, they rarely shift the daily experience of practicing law. Culture, however, does. Teams that draw energy from their leaders are more likely to endure strain without collapsing under it.

Enthusiasm transforms the experience of demanding work. Preparation becomes a journey toward mastery, AI adoption is seen as a chance for innovation and client work is approached as a partnership for success.

A 2013 article published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that when teams perceive stress as a challenge — rather than a threat — they experience healthier physiological responses, greater engagement and improved performance.^[6] This research highlights how leader-driven enthusiasm and positive reinforcement can shift mindsets, helping lawyers sustain effort and thrive even under pressure.

While enthusiasm cannot reduce the hours spent on trial or the complexity of discovery, it can change how those hours feel. When stress is reframed as an opportunity for growth, teams perform better and maintain resilience longer.

Unlike bonuses or benefits, enthusiasm does not deplete. The more leaders project it, the more teams generate it. It is the rare renewable resource in law, and its impact is amplified when leaders make it tangible through clear actions and genuine engagement.

Conclusion

Lawyers cannot control every pressure in front of them. But leaders can control the energy they bring into the room. When that energy is real, focused and easy for others to see, it changes how teams work, clients respond and firms adapt.

Enthusiasm is not peripheral. It is central to performance. It reduces resistance, accelerates adoption and shields against burnout. It also sends a signal — to associates, clients and courts — that this is a team that can embrace new tools, uphold ethical standards and deliver results under pressure.

In the AI era, enthusiasm is the renewable resource that will define not just great lawyering, but also resilient, forward-looking leadership.

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[1] Four months after a \$3B valuation, Harvey AI grows to \$5B, TechCrunch (June 23, 2025) <https://techcrunch.com/2025/06/23/four-months-after-a-3b-valuation-harvey-ai-grows-to-5b/>.

[2] California issues historic fine over lawyer's ChatGPT fabrications, Cal Matters (Sept. 22, 2025) <https://calmatters.org/economy/technology/2025/09/chatgpt-lawyer-fine-ai-regulation/>.

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[4] Fredrickson, Barbara L. "The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions." *Philosophical transactions of the royal society of London. Series B: Biological Sciences* 359.1449 (2004): 1367-1377.

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