

Breaking Ground in 2026: How Women Rainmakers Are Rewriting the Rules of Success



By Deborah B. Farone, February 15, 2026

For decades, business development across professional services followed a familiar script. Be visible in every way possible. Say “yes” often, even to assignments that don’t fit your practice. Work harder than the next person, and eventually the work will follow. That model rewarded stamina, scale, and a tolerance for discomfort that many quietly accepted as the price of success.

But for women, particularly those with fewer role models and more to take in managing the home and children, this didn’t work.

The good news is that something has shifted. In my research for *Breaking Ground: How Successful Women Lawyers Build Thriving Practices*, which draws on in-depth conversations with 60 senior women rainmakers across markets, practice areas, and legal systems, a different story consistently emerged. The most successful women were not winning by mimicking outdated models. They were succeeding by rewriting the rules altogether.

As we look ahead to 2026, the implications reach far beyond law firms. These lessons matter for anyone responsible for revenue, relationships, and trust in a complex, global environment. C-suite leaders, private investors, policymakers, and ultra-high-net-worth individuals all operate in ecosystems where credibility matters, reputations compound over time, and relationships are often the decisive variable.

Three principles stood out repeatedly. First, authenticity is not a soft concept. It is a strategic advantage. Second, trust is not assumed. It is deliberately earned and consistently maintained. Lastly, business development is not a sprint or a series of transactions. It is a long-term investment that rewards patience, focus, and integrity.

Authenticity as Strategy, Not Sentiment

Authenticity is often misunderstood as simply “being yourself.” In practice, what I heard from women rainmakers was far more disciplined. Authenticity meant clarity. It meant knowing how they wanted to work, who they wanted to serve, and what they were willing to say no to.

Many described early career years spent trying to fit a mold that did not align with their strengths or values. They attended events that drained them, pursued clients that were misaligned, and adopted styles of communication that felt unnatural. Over time, the most successful among them made a conscious shift. They stopped performing and started choosing.

This was not about withdrawing or becoming passive. It was about directing energy where it mattered most. One senior partner described it as “taking control of the inputs.”

She became intentional about which relationships deserved time, which conversations she wanted to lead, and where her expertise could make the greatest impact.

For leaders outside the legal profession, this resonates deeply. Authenticity at the senior level creates coherence. Teams trust leaders whose decisions align with their stated values. Clients and investors respond to consistency. When messaging, behavior, and strategy reinforce one another, credibility compounds.

Authenticity also creates sustainability. In a world where burnout is increasingly visible, professionals who operate in alignment with their strengths are better positioned to play the long game. That endurance is not accidental. It is designed.

Trust Is Built with Authenticity, Empathy, and Expertise

Trust rarely comes from a single interaction. It is built over time. It shows up in follow-through, responsiveness, discretion, and judgment. Across dozens of interviews, women rainmakers described trust not as a goal, but as a daily practice.

Empathy is a central pillar of building trust. The women and academics with whom I spoke talked about the importance of listening more than speaking, especially early in a relationship. They emphasized preparation, not only knowing the technical issues, but also understanding the

broader context in which a client or stakeholder was operating. Many referenced moments when they advised against a course of action that would have generated immediate fees but undermined a client's long-term interests at their company.

These decisions mattered. They were remembered. In several cases, they became the foundation for decades-long relationships.

Trust also travels. One of the most powerful findings from my research was how often work arrived indirectly. A client introduced them to another executive. A board member recommended them privately.

A peer trusted them with a sensitive referral. None of these moments was transactional. They were the result of accumulated confidence.

For global executives and investors, this mirrors reality. High-stakes decisions are rarely made based on credentials alone. They are informed by reputation, reliability, and the confidence that someone will deliver under pressure. Trust reduces friction. It accelerates decision-making. It lowers risk.

The Long Game Is the Only Game That Works

Even as a young associate at a law firm, lawyers have the opportunity to create the building blocks of business development. By remaining in touch with those they met during law school, and by fostering relationships with young practitioners at the client, they will be planting the seeds that will eventually yield business.

Perhaps the most consistent theme across my research was patience. Every rainmaker I interviewed rejected the idea of overnight success. Their practices were built over years, often decades, through steady, focused effort.

They invested in relationships long before there was an obvious return. They stayed in touch without an agenda. They shared insights freely. They showed up during moments of transition, not just moments of opportunity.

This approach requires confidence. It also requires leadership support. Short-term metrics often fail to capture the value of long-term relationship building. Yet, over time, these investments proved resilient. When markets shifted, leadership changed, or crises emerged, trusted advisors remained essential.

This has profound implications beyond professional services. In private capital, public policy, and global enterprise, relationships outlast cycles.

Strategies that prioritize immediate wins often erode the very trust needed to navigate complexity later.

Women rainmakers, in particular, demonstrated an ability to hold a long-term view even in environments that reward short-term results. Many attributed this to mentorship, experience, and a willingness to define success on their own terms.

Redefining Power and Influence

Another notable shift is how women rainmakers define influence. Traditional models often equated power with visibility or volume. The women I interviewed spoke instead about relevance and depth.

They focused on being indispensable to a smaller number of people rather than known by everyone. They curated networks intentionally. They invested time in understanding industries and sectors as well as their individual clients. They became connectors, not just advisors.

This model scales over time and eventually can travel across borders and cultures. In global environments where norms differ, authenticity, trust and a strong reputation act as universal currencies.

Influence today is less about authority and more about credibility. It is earned through consistency, empathy, and the ability to help bring people and ideas together around shared goals.

Practical Takeaways for Leaders in 2026

What does this mean in practical terms for leaders across sectors?

First, audit alignment. Are your business development efforts consistent with how you actually want to operate? If not, friction will show up somewhere, either in burnout, turnover, or missed opportunities. Consider coaching for individuals who need it, and add training at all levels to ensure you always have the best professionals up to bat.

Second, measure what matters.

Relationship strength, trust, and reputation may be harder to quantify, but they are not intangible.

Build systems that value long-term engagement, not just short-term output. This is where technology, like CRMs, can come into place.

Third, invest in people who think long term. The most effective rainmakers were not the loudest voices in the room. They were the most thoughtful. Organizations that reward this mindset gain resilience. Think about how you compensate your professionals. If they are only rewarded for short-term gains, you will soon see the long-term approach die out.

Finally, be patient. Sustainable success is cumulative. It rarely comes early. But when it arrives, it tends to endure.

Looking Ahead

As we move into 2026, the rules of success are being rewritten, not just by women rainmakers but by anyone willing to challenge outdated assumptions about how business is built. Authenticity is no longer a personal preference. It is a strategic imperative. Trust is not a byproduct. It is the foundation. And the long game is not optional. It is the only approach that consistently delivers meaningful, lasting results.

The leaders who understand this are not simply breaking ground. They are changing the landscape for those who follow.