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Firms need to raise the bar to gain lawyers' allegiance.

As you were saying.../by Paula Marshall and Jennifer Reese of the GoodWork® Project.

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Another one bites the dust.

The recent dissolution of the law firm of Hill and Barlow provides yet another example of how market pressures are affecting the standards and values of an honorable profession. With their focus on the bottom line, the real-estate group at Hill and Barlow reinforced an already negative view of lawyers in this country.

In his Herald article, Jon Chesto stated it would have been hard for the 107-year-old firm to survive without its real-estate group, given that this group composed one-fifth of the 122 lawyers in the firm. The article bemoans the fact that it's a reflection of the new economics that midsized firms face increasingly tough times.

What exactly does this statement imply? It suggests that when these lawyers recognized an opportunity for increased earnings, they took advantage of it - and, not surprisingly, their withdrawal from Hill and Barlow, a firm in which they drew a third of the profits, proved fatal.

That the real-estate lawyers found other employment opportunities more attractive is understandable, but what they completely disregard is the ethical dimension of a lawyer's allegiance to his or her professional associates. If the practice of law continues to emphasize how those in it can make more money, the demise of Hill and Barlow portends a similar fate for other law firms.

In our research with the GoodWork Project at Harvard Graduate School of Education, an ongoing study of ethics and values in the professions, we interviewed lawyers ranging from large corporate firms to small country practices.

Economics and market concerns surfaced repeatedly in these conversations. Intra- and interfirm competition, megabillable hours, advertising and technology were reminders that the changes in the practice of law impose barriers to the quality of life, not improve the experience of law for its practitioners.

The Hill and Barlow debacle is yet another example of how business principles and self-aggrandizement supersede traditional codes of loyalty and standards of practice.

For many, the real-estate group's culpability may seem clear. But as respected as this firm might be, it is not an innocent victim. We know from our interviews with midsize and large corporate law firms that each firm establishes a culture and enforces standards for

those it employs. One begets the other. When one side pushes for profit, that's the message received by the other side.

Though there are no easy solutions, a good place to start might be reconsidering the efficacy of billable hours vs. fixed fees, re-evaluating whether legal advertising sends the wrong message to those in the profession and maybe even refocusing the attention of the legal community on the goals of this esteemed profession rather than its ability to make those in it rich.

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