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THE FEEDBACK DEFICIT

How Law Firms Can Operationalize Feedback
Through Shared Models and Expectations

SECTION I:

THE COST OF SILENCE

Law firms demand precision and rigor in client work, yet internally the very conversations that fuel high performance are too often softened, delayed, or avoided. In the absence of clear guidance, lawyers often fill the void with assumptions that can quietly erode confidence, dilute engagement, and weaken performance. Feedback is not peripheral to the practice of law; it is a mechanism through which firms signal expectations, demonstrate investment, and reinforce accountability.

A REASON TO STAY

The NALP Foundation's *Should I Stay or Should I Go?* study shows how strongly associates value day-to-day guidance. Informal feedback ranked nearly as influential for retention as access to challenging work and autonomy, and meaningfully ahead of their formal evaluations.¹ Lawyers want clarity in the moment rather than ambiguity that lingers until review season.

This appetite for development extends beyond the legal profession. Deloitte's 2025 *Gen Z and Millennial Survey* shows that learning and development opportunities and meaningful guidance are among the top 3 reasons younger professionals choose employers.² They expect feedback to be part of their workflow.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE FEEDBACK

Narrative feedback is especially powerful. Research shared in the *Harvard Business Review* shows that qualitative feedback provides clearer direction and is viewed as more fair and more motivating than numeric ratings.³ In a profession that depends on judgment and precision, narrative feedback gives people the information they need to improve their work.

The costs of silence accumulate across financial, cultural, developmental, and strategic dimensions. The risk of attrition increases. Trust erodes. Talent plateaus. Collaboration suffers. These pressures create the feedback deficit, a structural issue that affects both the economics and culture of every firm.

¹ Trevelyan Hornblower, Fiona; Mandery, Jennifer C.; Horne, Skip. *Should I Stay or Should I Go? Key Factors Driving Law Firm Associate Retention*. NALP Foundation, 2024.

² Faber, Elizabeth. *Gen Z & Millennial Survey*. Deloitte, 2025.

³ Kim, Joonyoung; Zitek, Emily. "Research: Performance Reviews That Actually Motivate Employees." *Harvard Business Review*, 2024.

The cost of silence shows up across four dimensions:

FINANCIAL	The NALP Foundation’s CY-2024 Associate Attrition Report (U.S. & Canada) reports an overall associate attrition rate of ~20% ⁴ , underscoring the recruiting and training costs of disengagement.
CULTURAL	Unspoken tensions and misalignment undermine trust and belonging.
DEVELOPMENTAL	Without specific, timely input, lawyers plateau and become disengaged, whereas narrative feedback correlates with motivation and perceived fairness.
STRATEGIC	Partners who share knowledge and collaborate across practices drive higher client revenue. ⁵ Such collaboration relies on candid, timely communication and real-time feedback to coordinate work and build trust.

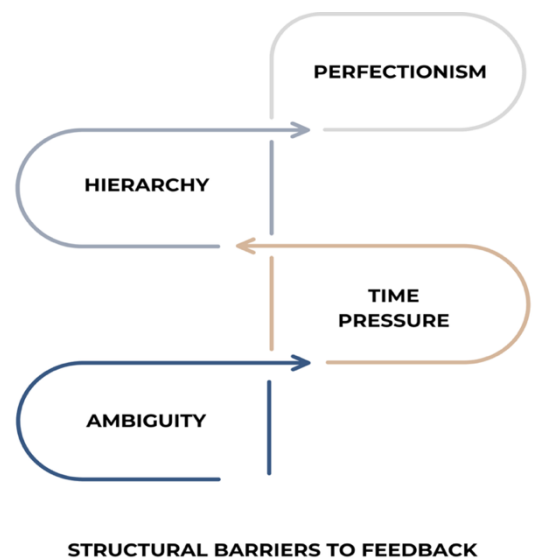
SECTION II:

THE FORCES THAT UNDERMINE FEEDBACK

If feedback is so valuable, why is it so difficult to deliver? The answer lies not in personal reluctance but in the architecture of firm life. Four forces reliably undermine candid conversations: perfectionism, hierarchy, time pressure, and ambiguity. Together, these forces create an environment where silence often feels safer than clarity.

PERFECTIONISM

Lawyers are trained to anticipate risk. That vigilance is essential in client work, but internally it leads people to treat imperfection as a liability. Partners may hesitate to surface developmental needs. Associates may fear that questions will signal weakness. When identity becomes fused with performance, feedback feels like a judgment rather than a path forward.



⁴ NALP Foundation. CY-2024 Associate Attrition Report (U.S. & Canada). NALP Foundation, 2024.

⁵ Gardner, Heidi K. Smart Collaboration: How Professionals and Their Firms Succeed by Breaking Down Silos. Harvard Business Review Press, 2017.

HIERARCHY

Communication flows down more easily than it flows up. Associates receive feedback, but partners often operate without structured insight into their own leadership or communication style. This reinforces the belief that feedback is a developmental tool for junior lawyers. In reality, a leader's openness to feedback is a strong component of trust within a team.

TIME PRESSURE

In a billable environment, development often competes with delivery. Yet effective feedback does not require lengthy meetings. It is brief, specific, and embedded in workflow. A concise course correction or a quick debrief are far more efficient and far more impactful than an annual review that arrives long after the moment for feedback has passed.

AMBIGUITY

Without a shared framework or cadence, feedback is inconsistent at best, and silence can feel like indifference. Sporadic criticism can feel personal. A predictable cadence, including mid-matter check-ins, project debriefs, mentoring touchpoints and, upward feedback, transform feedback from an improvised act into a regular practice.

Firms that address these structural barriers create conditions where candid communication is possible. As the emotional charge surrounding feedback diminishes, alignment improves. Learning accelerates. Collaboration becomes easier. The cumulative effect is significant: higher trust, faster growth, and more consistent performance.

When feedback becomes part of workflow instead of an afterthought, it strengthens client work rather than competing with it. This shift in habit forms the foundation for the transformation described in the next sections. The A.L.I.G.N. Feedback Model™ and the A.L.I.G.N. Maturity Model™ illustrate how firms can move from silence to clarity, and from clarity to a culture that supports continuous development.

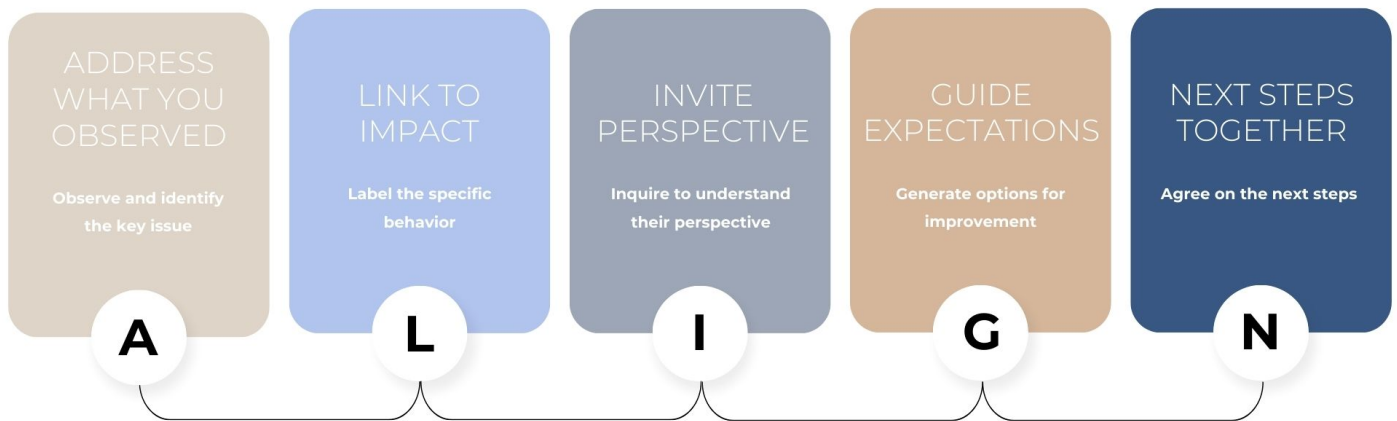
SECTION III:

FINDING A COMMON LANGUAGE

THE A.L.I.G.N. FEEDBACK MODEL™

Our A.L.I.G.N. Feedback Model™ gives partners and associates a shared framework for effective developmental dialogue. It translates the emotional complexity of feedback into a simple, repeatable process that promotes both candor and trust.

Each step builds on the last, guiding leaders to move from observation to action.



A - ADDRESS WHAT YOU OBSERVED

Start with facts, not feelings. Describe the specific behavior you saw or heard, avoiding interpretation or judgment. This grounds the conversation in shared reality and lowers defensiveness.

"In the meeting today, when the client raised her concerns about the deal structure, you moved to explaining our position before acknowledging what she said."

Why it is effective: By separating observation from evaluation, you frame the discussion as data-driven, not personal.

L – LINK TO IMPACT

Explain the effect on the client, the team, or the outcome. Connecting feedback to real consequences gives it meaning and context.

"That may have reduced her confidence that we are fully aligned with her priorities."

Why it is effective: People change faster when they understand why it matters, not just what to change.

I – INVITE PERSPECTIVE

Ask open-ended questions that surface the associate’s reasoning, awareness, or intent. This transforms feedback from a lecture into a dialogue.

"What were you noticing in that moment? What led you to respond as quickly as you did?"

Why it is effective: Curiosity builds ownership. When associates articulate their own insight, learning becomes internal, not imposed.

G – GUIDE EXPECTATIONS

Clarify what success looks like next time. Be concrete, behavioral, and forward-looking.

“In conversations like this, try pausing to reflect back the client’s concern before offering analysis. Even a brief acknowledgement helps reinforce that we understand what matters to them.”

Why it is effective: Clarity replaces ambiguity. Partners often assume their standards are self-evident; in reality, they need to be named.

N – NEXT STEPS TOGETHER

End by agreeing on action and on follow-up. Feedback without reinforcement quickly fades; feedback with partnership builds trust and accountability.

“Let’s continue checking in about client conversations as they come up so that we can discuss what is working well and what you want to try next.”

Why it is effective: This step signals commitment. The relationship becomes collaborative, not evaluative—one of shared responsibility for improvement.

WHAT SETS THE A.L.I.G.N. MODEL™ FEEDBACK APART

The **A.L.I.G.N.™ Model** brings together two essential forces: psychological safety and performance accountability. It gives partners a structured approach that is clear enough to guide action and flexible enough to respect individual style. A.L.I.G.N. also shifts the firm’s culture from episodic performance conversations to continuous development.

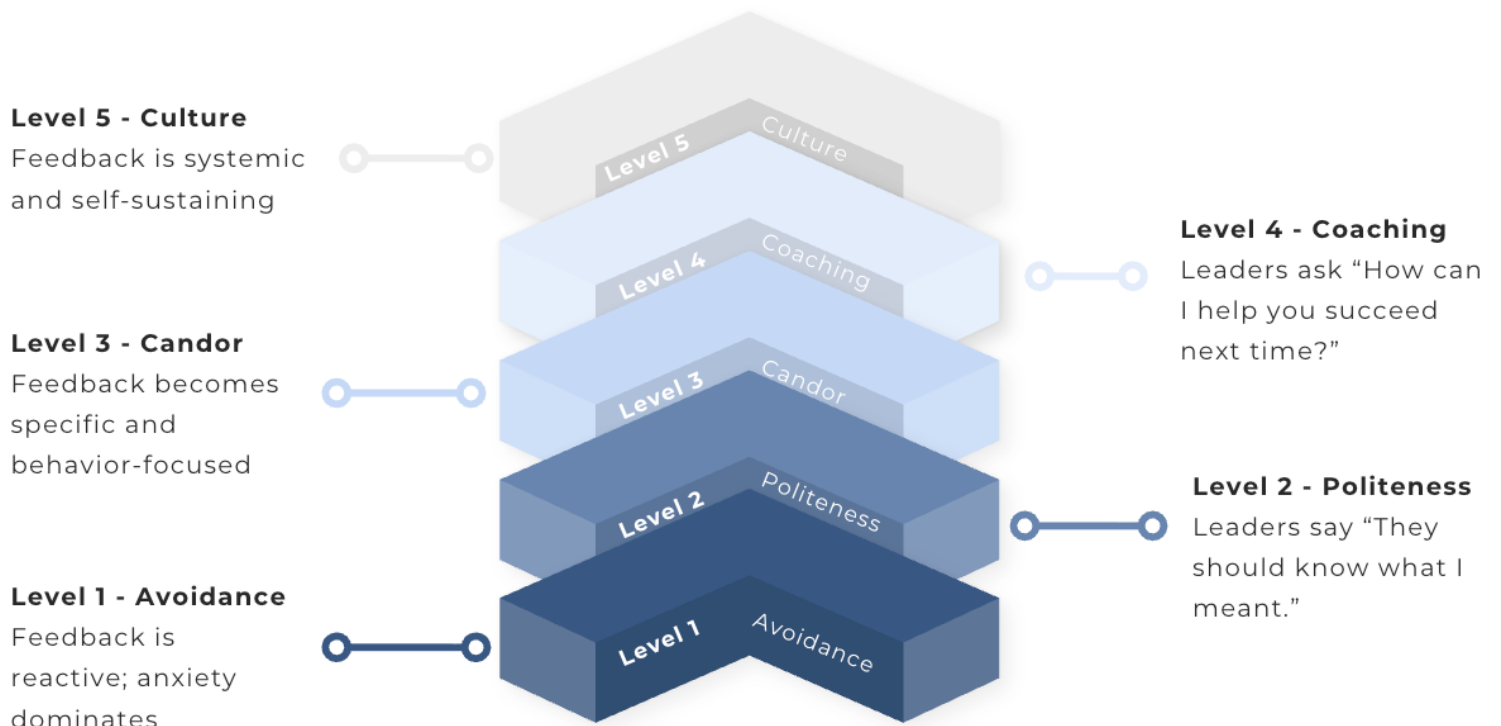
SECTION IV:

THE A.L.I.G.N. MATURITY MODEL™

Law firms are defined by their culture — the unspoken norms that shape how people communicate, collaborate, and grow. Yet when it comes to feedback, many partners and firms operate far below their potential. Our **A.L.I.G.N. Maturity Model™** offers a practical framework to map a partner’s or a firm’s evolution from feedback avoidance to a culture of continuous learning.

Rooted in research on organizational behavior, psychological safety and adult learning, the model integrates established principles from behavioral science with our extensive experience coaching and advising law firm leaders. It adapts the familiar concept of a “maturity model”, widely used in business and technology, to the distinctive feedback dynamics of law firms. The progression from **Avoidance → Politeness → Candor → Coaching → Culture** reflects the behavioral and systemic shifts required for a feedback-rich environment.

The model serves as both a diagnostic tool and a roadmap: a way for leaders to better understand their firm’s current feedback culture and to chart a deliberate path toward higher levels of candor, trust, and performance.



LEVEL 1	AVOIDANCE: "SILENCE AS A SAFETY"
<p>At the base of the ladder lies <i>Avoidance</i>, a stage characterized by discomfort, fear, and the belief that silence prevents conflict. In these firms, feedback typically emerges only in moments of crisis, after a deal goes sideways, or after an associate unexpectedly resigns.</p> <p>Firms at this level often confuse quiet with calm. In reality, they are cultivating an environment of tension where learning and trust both become stagnant.</p>	<p>Indicators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Partners equate feedback with confrontation. ○ Performance issues are addressed only during annual reviews or after significant mistakes. ○ High performers receive little developmental input; underperformers are blindsided. ○ Conversations focus on problems rather than solutions. <p>Cultural Markers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Psychological safety is minimal; anxiety dominates. ○ Associates interpret silence as approval or worse, disinterest. ○ Feedback avoidance is rationalized as "maintaining collegiality." <p>Leaders say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ "If they don't hear from me, it means they are doing a good job."

LEVEL 2

POLITENESS: “FEEDBACK LITE”

In the *Politeness* stage, firms begin to talk about feedback, but cautiously. Feedback is often filtered through excessive diplomacy, vague language, or delayed delivery. This politeness stems from a genuine desire to maintain harmony, but it ultimately impedes clarity and progress.

Firms at this level have taken a step toward openness but remain stuck in the middle ground between honesty and diplomacy. The cost is clarity, and, often, credibility.

Indicators:

- Feedback is phrased in generalities (“You could be more proactive”).
- Timing is poor; feedback follows long after the event.
- Associates report confusion: they know something is wrong, but not what.

Cultural Markers:

- Psychological safety remains fragile as associates hesitate to ask questions.
- Feedback is delivered with excessive diplomacy, leading to mixed signals.
- Efforts to maintain collegiality lead to conversations that prioritize comfort over clarity.

Leaders say:

- “They should know what I meant.”

LEVEL 3

CANDOR: “CLARITY WITH CARE”

Candor marks the turning point. At this stage, feedback becomes specific, behavior-based, and anchored in observable outcomes rather than personality. It is delivered with respect and grounded in the belief that transparency fuels growth.

The shift from *Politeness* to *Candor* is the most significant inflection point in a firm’s path to a culture of feedback. It requires courage—to name the truth—and empathy—to do so in a way that strengthens relationships rather than eroding them.

Indicators:

- Feedback is tied to real examples (“In yesterday’s client meeting, you interrupted twice. Let’s discuss how to handle that differently next time.”).
- Associates receive feedback regularly, not just during review cycles.
- Leaders differentiate between intent and impact.
- Conversations begin to include reflection: “How did that land for you?”

Cultural Markers:

- The firm invests in communication and coaching training.
- Feedback is reframed as an act of professionalism, not personal criticism.
- Leaders hold one another accountable for modeling openness.

Leaders say:

- “Let’s talk about what worked and what didn’t.”

LEVEL 4
COACHING: “INQUIRY AS LEADERSHIP”

In the *Coaching* stage, feedback transcends evaluation and becomes a catalyst for development. Leaders approach feedback as a dialogue, not a download. They use inquiry, curiosity, and accountability to help others generate their own insights and solutions.

At this level, leaders no longer see feedback as a one-way transmission of expertise but as a mutual process of growth. The firm begins to institutionalize learning through coaching conversations that cascade across levels.

Indicators:

- Feedback conversations begin with questions: “What did you notice?” “What would you do differently?”
- Partners and senior associates engage in real-time course correction.
- Developmental feedback is frequent, forward-looking, and actionable.
- Feedback training is integrated into leadership development programs.

Cultural Markers:

- The tone shifts from judgment to partnership.
- Coaching becomes part of everyday practice management, not a separate event.
- Leaders embrace vulnerability by asking for feedback themselves.

Leaders say:

- “How can I help you succeed?”

LEVEL 5
CULTURE: “FEEDBACK AS A SYSTEM”

At the top of the ladder lies *Culture*, the point at which feedback is not merely a skill or a process but a defining feature of the firm’s identity. In these firms, feedback flows multidirectionally, partner to associate, associate to partner, peer to peer—and is embedded in the firm’s systems, rituals, and values.

Here, feedback is no longer merely a leadership behavior; it is an organizational habit. The culture itself becomes self-sustaining, as individuals at all levels model and expect continuous growth.

Indicators:

- Feedback is continuous, not episodic.
- Performance management systems reinforce learning and agility.
- Promotion criteria include demonstrated coaching and feedback capability.
- Feedback loops inform everything from client debriefs to talent reviews.

Cultural Markers:

- Feedback is normalized as both an expectation and a privilege.
- Leaders model the culture through openness and responsiveness.
- The firm invests in structures that sustain feedback at scale like 360-degree feedback, systematic matter debriefs, etc.

Leaders say:

- “Feedback is how we get better—together.”

THE INFLECTION POINT

The pivotal shift in the A.L.I.G.N. Maturity Model™ happens between **Politeness** and **Candor**, i.e. the moment a firm or a partner chooses clarity over comfort. This decision reshapes culture, strengthens teams, and signals a true commitment to developing talent.

“THE MOVE FROM POLITENESS TO CANDOR IS THE INFLECTION POINT THAT DEFINES A FIRM’S CULTURE.”

APPLYING THE A.L.I.G.N. MODELS™ IN PRACTICE

To support the practical application of both the **A.L.I.G.N. Feedback Model™** and the **A.L.I.G.N. Maturity Model™**, we have developed a set of assessments and learning experiences that help firms understand where they are today, and what meaningful progress might look like. The **A.L.I.G.N. Feedback Assessment™** examines how individual partners and senior professionals currently navigate feedback conversations, capturing patterns in clarity, candor, preparation, and follow-through. At the organizational level, the **A.L.I.G.N. Maturity Assessment™** measures a firm’s feedback culture against the five stages of the A.L.I.G.N. Maturity Model™, offering a structured way to identify strengths, cultural norms, and areas that may benefit from targeted attention.

Insights from these assessments can be paired with tailored training programs—including the **A.L.I.G.N. Feedback Masterclass™**, the **A.L.I.G.N. Leadership Program™**, and practice group workshops that translate the models into everyday behaviors. These sessions provide partners and leaders with shared language, clearer expectations, and practical tools for strengthening feedback across the firm. While the specific learning experiences vary by firm, the overarching aim remains consistent: to help organizations build a feedback culture that supports professional growth, collaboration, and long-term institutional effectiveness.

SECTION V:

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR FEEDBACK

1. QUALITATIVE, PERSON-TO-PERSON FEEDBACK INCREASES MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT

In Section I, we made the case for qualitative, narrative feedback which offers deeper, more personal insights which are viewed as more fair and more motivating than numeric ratings.

In law firms, this distinction matters. Our own work with our clients clearly shows that associates consistently say that informal, real-time guidance helps them understand expectations more clearly than annual reviews or rating systems. Without regular,

person-driven feedback, the feedback deficit widens and uncertainty grows. Closing the feedback loop through brief, specific conversations gives associates the clarity they need to perform and partners the confidence that their expectations are understood.

2. HIGHER ENGAGEMENT LEADS TO STRONGER PERFORMANCE

Talent professionals know that employee engagement is closely linked to stronger organizational outcomes, including higher quality work, greater client satisfaction, and improved productivity. Engagement is significantly shaped by leadership behaviors such as clear communication, well-defined expectations, and consistent feedback.

Within law firms, engagement shows up as responsiveness, ownership, and the ability to manage demanding workloads. It weakens when expectations are unclear or when lawyers are left to infer their performance through silence. By closing the feedback loop, firms strengthen engagement because people understand how they are doing, what to improve, and how their work advances the client and firm goals.

3. ORGANIZATIONS WITH STRONG FEEDBACK CULTURES PERFORM BETTER

Research conducted jointly by the University of Southern California Center for Effective Organizations and the Institute for Corporate Productivity found that organizations with a strong performance feedback culture, defined by frequent, high-quality feedback tied to development, have better employee-oriented outcomes.⁶ Moreover, performance management best practices, including developmental feedback and 360-degree feedback, are significantly related to positive organizational outcomes, including profitability.

For law firms, where client service excellence and retention impact profitability, this finding crystallizes the importance of feedback. A mature feedback culture reduces rework, accelerates learning, and improves collaboration, all of which contribute to economic performance. Closing the feedback loop is therefore not only a cultural imperative; it is a business strategy.

MOVING TOWARD A CULTURE OF FEEDBACK

Taken together, these findings reinforce the progression outlined in the **A.L.I.G.N. Maturity Model™**. Firms at the lower levels of the model, Avoidance and Politeness, struggle with uncertainty, disengagement, and inconsistent performance because feedback is limited, delayed, or overly softened. As firms move upward toward Candor, Coaching, and ultimately Culture, they strengthen the conditions for a high-performance culture: clear expectations, meaningful engagement, faster learning, and stronger business results. Advancing along the maturity model is not simply an evolution in communication style; it is a measurable shift in how effectively a firm develops its people and delivers its work.

⁶ Center for Effective Organizations, University of Southern California, and Institute for Corporate Productivity. Performance Feedback Culture Drives Business Performance. 2019.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julia Mercier is the Principal of Mercier Talent Solutions LLC, a consulting firm dedicated to the development of lawyers and law firm leaders. Drawing on her background as a litigator and more than a decade leading professional development programs in global law firms, Julia helps lawyers build the leadership, communication, and management capabilities required for long-term success.

Julia's coaching practice is focused on senior associates, partners, practice group leaders, and senior business professionals. She works with leaders to refine executive presence, strengthen communication skills, navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, and build the leadership habits that support high-performing teams. Her work also addresses strategic delegation, performance management, and the broader systems that shape collaboration and accountability in law firms.



She designs and delivers 360-degree feedback programs for partners and senior leaders, using qualitative interviews, structured analysis, and personalized coaching to help leaders understand how their behaviors are experienced across the firm. These insights inform her approach to helping leaders close their own feedback loops and model the clarity and candor that support stronger cultures.

Julia is the creator of the **A.L.I.G.N. Feedback Model™** and the **A.L.I.G.N. Maturity Model™**, two evidence-informed frameworks that translate recurring patterns from years of coaching, training, and 360-degree feedback into practical tools for building intentional and developmental feedback cultures.

She holds a law degree from the University of Montreal (2004) and an executive coaching certification from New York University (2016). She is also a Certified DISC Practitioner, a Hogan-certified coach, an MBTI Certified Practitioner, and a Mental Health First Aid Instructor. Outside of her coaching practice, Julia is a competitive amateur rider who brings lessons from the discipline into her leadership work, particularly around mindfulness, discipline, and presence. She also contributes her expertise *pro bono* to the UN Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, supporting initiatives that advance gender equality and women's leadership in conflict-affected areas.