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5 Steps to Taking Charge of Your Legal Career

By Timothy D. Batdorf

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Being a lawyer can be frustrating. Expectations and demands are often overwhelming. It is easy to get caught up in the details of day-to-day work life and forget the big picture.

If you want something more from your legal career, you are not alone. But most of us have no idea how to accomplish this goal. Here are five steps you can take today:

Step 1: Be rigorously honest. It is so easy to deceive ourselves. We have spent tens of thousands of dollars and years of our lives being trained to do exactly what we do. So, why would we ever want to admit we do not like it? And, if we do admit it, then what? Lawyers are very intelligent people, but when it comes to our careers, many of us do not act so intelligently. We negotiate like a pit bull for our clients, but we settle for abject misery in our work lives. The first step to taking charge of your career is to be honest with yourself. After all, if you cannot be honest with yourself, who can you be honest with? Here is a simple question for you: Do you love what you do?

Step 2: Challenge your beliefs. According to surveys, successful law students are the most cynical graduate students around. What do cynical law students grow up to be? Cynical lawyers. Being cynical may be a wonderful tool for the practice of law, but it is a horrible way to live. Trust me. I know. When I graduated from law school, I never thought I could practice tax law. (I did not think I was smart enough.) When I worked at a big law firm, I did not think I could leave. (I did not think I had the courage.) I never thought I would love the practice of law. (I did not think it was possible.) Yet I have accomplished all these things and more. When I challenge my limiting beliefs, doors open. New worlds unfold.

Step 3: Think big. The size of your imagination dictates the size of your life. How big are the questions you ask yourself? Do you ask, "How can I grind more hours away at the firm?" Or, do you ask, "How can I create a career that is fun, energizing, meaningful, rewarding, and inspiring?" Wherever you focus is where you will direct your time and attention. Asking big questions reconnects you to what is important in your life, moving you toward your bigger goals.

Step 4: Be practical. Taking charge of your career requires practicality. Take small steps. Develop a strategy and stick to it. You might even discover you can tweak

things at your current job and be happy. Instead of burning bridges, you can build them. Perhaps your current job is a “bridge” helping you transition to something you will truly enjoy.

Step 5: Find allies. Finding allies is often the most difficult yet most critical step. As lawyers, we isolate ourselves. When we suffer, we suffer alone. We tell ourselves our suffering is noble. What hogwash! Life is short. Find mentors who have done what you want to do. Hire a career coach to help you accelerate your learning curve. Do not wait a decade to create the career you want.

READY RESOURCES

- Judge for Yourself: Clarity, Choice, and Action in Your Legal Career. 2006. PC # CEV05JFYB. Career Resource Center and Center for CLE.

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