

Personal Performance and Development Plans

Recently I was asked why lawyers should prepare Personal Performance and Development Plans. I was surprised by the question, in part because I have prepared such plans from my first year as a lawyer. When I clearly understand my purpose, I am energized, committed and disciplined about my career -- I know where I want to go and have a plan to get there. To not plan is to risk getting lost. As Yogi Berra once said: "If you don't know where you are going, you are likely to end up somewhere else." For me, I need to not only know where I am going, but I also need a map to show me if I am on-course for my destination. If I do not think of my future and chart a written course, I will not have the discipline to take the actions necessary to get there. I know many lawyers who have never had a written career plan and have instead focused on doing the highest quality work possible. While some of these lawyers are very successful, I often wonder what they might have achieved had they actually planned their careers.

When I was a Jenkins & Gilchrist shareholder, I conducted career development workshops for associates in each of our offices. My workshops were based in part on ideas from a lifetime of studying successful people and what distinguishes them as well as reading books about success. First, I let participants know that they are responsible for their career success and happiness. As a construction lawyer, I used construction terminology. I told them they are the *architect* of their careers. Where we are now in our career is a product of the *foundation* we have been given and the career-building decisions we have made to date. Where we go from here is up to us. A firm can help, but each lawyer is responsible for his or her career.

Second, in planning our career we must each have a vision of where we want to go and what we want to accomplish. For each of us this will be different and our ability to see the future will be different. To put this in construction terms, we must *design* our career with an idea of what we are building. In this part of the workshop, I asked associates to focus on their purpose by thinking about why they wanted to practice law. I asked them to think about what they want to become and what it will take to get there. I asked them to set some goals to achieve this year. Finally, I had them think about what core values are important to them.

Third, I told associates they need to *build* their careers around something that energizes them enough to have the discipline and persistence to succeed. I recommend young lawyers read books by Stephen Covey and David Maister. Both authors say we should ask ourselves: What is the one thing we aren't doing now that if we were doing it would make the greatest difference in our life? In this section, we discussed work-family balance. I asked our associates to think about their personal and professional responsibilities and to set their goals and develop their career plan with those responsibilities in mind. I asked them to specifically focus on their non-billable time and how they could spend it most wisely.

Each associate was given a questionnaire to help them prepare their Personal Performance and Development Plan. In completing the questionnaire, I suggested our associates get ideas from a mentor.

The Plan asks associates to estimate their production and think about where they expect their billable work to come from for the year. While each of us is unable to accurately predict our production for the year, there is value in trying to identify potential sources of work. I asked associates to identify what client teams interest them, what type of work assignments would provide them with the greatest learning opportunities, and which senior attorneys they would like to work for. The remainder of the Plan focuses on how the associate intends to use his or her non-billable time. I included a list of virtually every investment activity. Obviously the associate is not expected to do all of the activities or even close to all of them. Generally, the greater the focus on a few activities the better. The mentor can offer valuable ideas on how the associate can best utilize his or her investment time.

The Personal Performance and Development Plan will be of little value if it is not implemented. By being a part of its development, the mentor has what David Maister describes as “nagging rights.” Hopefully, mentors will meet with associates to see how they are doing in implementing their plans and see if any part of it should be amended. At the end of the year, the associate’s evaluation reflects how well he or she implemented the plan.

The Personal Performance and Development Plans helps associates make the vital distinction between what they do – provide high quality legal services – and what they hope to accomplish, i.e., attract x number of new clients to the firm. While concepts such as “quality” are foggy, numbers are easily defined. The Plan makes it possible for associates to see where they are going and map out the route to their destination.