

Goals and Career Planning

Recently I spoke with a young partner named Lisa about her career. I learned Lisa had some ideas about what she wanted to do, but had not written any goals or a plan to achieve what she wanted. When Lisa described what she wanted from her law career, her description was fuzzy and ambiguous. I wanted to suggest she would never achieve her career dreams without clearly defining what they are and developing written goals and a plan. But, I bit my tongue and decided to listen and get to know her better.

I learned she had recently returned from a long planned bicycling vacation in China. She described in detail what she had done each day and the places she visited. She provided vivid details of the scenery she had seen and photographed, and the culture she had experienced. Lisa was passionate about cycling, especially in Asia and Europe.

After listening for several minutes I began asking questions. I learned Lisa had begun planning her trip almost two years earlier. When she began planning, Lisa had no specific plans for her trip beyond visiting the Great Wall and Beijing. But she conducted extensive on-line research, bought a couple of books and spoke with travel agents. Based on her research, she decided that the “Bike China” tour that included Beijing and the Great Wall and many other places she wanted to visit appeared to best meet her needs. She planned her travel time and airline itinerary. She described in detail her thoughts before the trip and I learned she had actually visualized many of the places she would visit and things she wanted to do on the trip.

I then asked Lisa how much time she thought she had spent planning her China vacation. She told me she thought she had spent at least 40 hours researching and planning her trip. I thought I had an opening. I simply asked if she would be willing to spend the same amount of time planning her career. I also asked if she would be willing to try to establish goals that were as specific as the ones she had for her China trip and if she would approach accomplishing them with the same energy and passion she had for her vacation.

Isn't it ironic that many lawyers spend more time and energy planning their vacation than they do planning their career? Isn't it also ironic that, when asked, they can clearly explain why they want to go to a particular vacation spot, what they plan to do while there and what they need to do to get ready for the trip?

John M. Richardson, Jr. has an expression I like: “When it comes to the future, there are three kinds of people: those who let it happen; those who make it happen and those who wonder what happened?” Some young lawyers seem reluctant to make it happen by taking responsibility for their career success and happiness. In many cases they know how to please others including their supervising attorneys, but they have given little thought to what they want.

Tony Robbins, the successful motivational speaker and author of *Get the Edge* and other books, suggests beginning with filling in the blanks to the following statements:

What is most important to me in my life is _____?

What is most important to me in my career is _____?

He then suggests asking the question:

What has to happen for me to feel _____?

This is a good way to start setting goals and developing a plan.

In his book entitled *Goals: How To get Everything You Want Faster Than You Ever Thought Possible*, Brian Tracy, another noted business speaker and author, contends: “The primary reason for great success is clear, specific, measurable goals and plans, written down and accompanied by a burning desire to accomplish them.” Tracy further states: “The clearer you are about what you want, the more rapidly you will attain it. When you are absolutely clear about your goals, you activate all powers of your mind to help you achieve them.” Tracy further explains: “When you are working toward a goal of your own choosing, your superconscious mind will generate a continuous flow of ideas and energy to help move you onward.”

If there is evidence that people who set goals and have a plan to achieve them are more likely successful and happy about their careers, why are so many lawyers reluctant to do so? I believe many lawyers find it difficult to clearly define what they want and to establish goals unique to them. They know how to please others -- parents, teachers, professors, bar examiners and senior lawyers -- but have not focused on what they want from their career. They have had a single focused goal: “to achieve high enough grades to get a job with a respected firm or company.”

Here are seven things law firms need to do to help associates set and achieve goals::

1. Help young lawyers focus on why they wanted to become a lawyer.
2. Ask them to describe what is most important in their life and in their career.
3. Help them establish goals centered on what is important to them and to the firm.
4. Brainstorm with them what they must do to achieve each goal.
5. Assist them in preparing a plan to achieve their goals.
6. Monitor their performance throughout the year.
7. Provide constructive feedback, including real-time praise.