

# The Path To Partnership

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## Cordell M. Parvin

built a national construction practice during his 35 years practicing law. At Jenkins & Gilchrist, Mr. Parvin was the Construction Law Practice Group Leader and was also responsible for the firm's attorney development practice. While there he taught client development and created a coaching program for junior partners. In 2005, Mr. Parvin left the firm and started Cordell Parvin LLC. He now works with lawyers and law firms on career development and planning and client development. He is the author of *Prepare to Win: The Lawyer's Guide to Rainmaking, Career Success and Life Fulfillment* and other books for lawyers. To learn more, visit his Web site, [www.cordellparvin.com](http://www.cordellparvin.com), his Blog: <http://www.lawconsultingblog.com/>, or contact him at [cparvin@cordellparvin.com](mailto:cparvin@cordellparvin.com).

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**Making partner is an event. Becoming a successful partner is an achievement.**

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**ONE OF THE** lawyers I am coaching recently sent me a link to an American Lawyer article titled *Midlevel Survey Shows Associates Eyeing the Door*. One of the main points of the article is that even though most associates think they can make partner in their firms, many are not sure they really want to make partner. Those associates see junior partners working even harder than they are and they conclude that making partner is not for them. Many are also stressed out and discouraged by the competitive nature of their law firms and the constant comparisons that are made with other lawyers. This article is about how you can do a more realistic job of making that decision; and how you can blaze the path to partnership if you decide that it is the direction you want to take.

**BLAZING THE PATH** • Last year I did a program for the senior associates of a New York based firm. The title was "Path to Partnership." Here is a short summary of the points I covered.

### **You Have To Decide: Do You Want To Become A Partner?**

As explained above, an increasing number of associates really do not want to make partner. Although I believe it is important for lawyers to live the life they choose

rather than the life chosen by their parents or partners in their law firm, the downside of not wanting to make partner is that associates lose something to strive to achieve. I am reminded of a story in the book *Your Highest Goal*. Charles Garfield, the author of *Peak Performers* had previously worked on the Apollo program. Garfield says that the day after billions of people watched Neil Armstrong take the first step on the moon, the morale at NASA was in the tank. He said

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that the next morning he went back to his desk at NASA and noticed that everything had changed. People were working but there was no excitement. He asked his boss what had happened. His boss took him outside and pointed to the moon that could be seen faintly in the morning sky. “We don’t have that to motivate us anymore,” he explained.

Partners I know that are both successful and happy are not motivated by money. More often they are motivated by having clients and helping those clients achieve their goals and solve their problems. If you decide you do not want to become a partner, you likely will not have clients. You will be more like a technician. What then will motivate you?

### Attributes Of Partners

I am frequently asked: “Other than being a talented lawyer, what is the single most important attribute you must have to make partner?” For me the answer is easy. You have to have a burning desire so that you will make the commitments and have the discipline to stay with it when you want to quit. With the burning desire you are more likely to persist, persevere, and be patient. When I did the program last year I also moderated a panel of five lawyers who had made partner in their firms. Although their paths to partnership varied, the one thing they shared was the ability to get through the

dips when they thought it was just way too hard. Once they became responsible for clients, getting through the dips became easier.

I have mentored, and more recently coached, hundreds of young lawyers over many years. While their practices are different, their firms are different and their personality types are different, they share

common attributes that enable them to be successful. In addition to being really fine lawyers with great personal integrity and having

a burning desire to be the best they can be, they:

- Take responsibility for their careers;
- Understand what is personally important to them;
- Use time wisely;
- Develop relationships/business; and
- Build a team.

Let’s talk about each of those traits.

### Taking Responsibility For Your Career

First, let’s discuss taking responsibility for your career. Here are some of the salient points:

- You are the architect of your career;
- Focus on opportunities and solutions not problems and obstacles;
- Develop a plan for your career by focusing on what you want to be in the future;
- Execute your plan and stay on track;
- Discover what you need to do to achieve your goals and have the discipline to do them;
- Define your personal and professional roles (husband/wife, father/mother, productive attorney, developing attorney, etc.). Plan for each role and execute the plan.

You are responsible for creating the career and life you desire. Your firm is not responsible for your success. The partners for whom you work are not responsible for your success. You are the architect

of your career and to create the career you want you will want to think about the future.

Experts tell us that we constantly talk to ourselves. Our “self-talk” is either helpful or hindering us. To paraphrase a quote from Winston Churchill: “The pessimist (less successful lawyer) sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist (successful lawyer) sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

Less successful lawyers frequently say: “Yes, but...” More successful lawyers say: “Sure! How?” Less successful lawyers say: “My problem is...” More successful lawyers say: “My opportunity is...” Less successful lawyers say: “I need to...” More

successful lawyers see endless possibilities and say: “I want to...” Less successful lawyers say: “I am not willing to be successful

if it means...” More successful lawyers say: “I can be successful and...” Less successful lawyers say: “I do not have time to...” More successful lawyers say: “I will make time to...” Less successful lawyers say: “I will try my best to...” More successful lawyers say: “I will achieve...” Less successful lawyers find something wrong with any new idea. More successful lawyers figure out how they can use the new idea. So, listen to your self-talk and, if necessary, consciously make a change in what you are telling yourself. To do so, ask yourself: “What would be a helpful thought about this?”

### Identifying Your Major Definite Purpose

I learned about major definite purpose when I was a teenager and stumbled upon the book *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill. He described having a major definite purpose as the starting point for success. So, what is the value of having a major definite purpose and how do you determine it?

Identifying your major definite purpose will:

- Give you clarity about what you want to be;
- Provide direction;

- Energize you.

Your major definite purpose is the intersection of:

- Your talent—what you are really good at;
- Your passion—what you love to do;
- Client need—what clients need help with.

Once you decide your major definite purpose, then ask why it is important to you. If you do not have a good answer to the “why” question, it is unlikely you will have the discipline and commitment to achieve it. Charles Garfield’s story of the morale at NASA reminds me that the best example of a major definite purpose in my lifetime was when

President Kennedy told Congress that we would put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. When President Kennedy

gave his speech to Congress, the Russians were way ahead of us, and we were afraid that if the Russians landed on the moon first, they would control space and potentially control us. That was great motivation for the space program.

What was my major definite purpose? In 1978, I decided I wanted to be the preeminent and most innovative transportation construction lawyer in the United States. Why was that important to me? I wanted to be an expert in something and recognized by my potential clients as the expert. I appreciated contractors and many were my friends from college. My major definite purpose was also to teach. As a result, I found ways to teach my clients how to achieve their objectives and how to avoid the problems they could encounter.

What is your major definite purpose? Why is it important to you? What are steps you want to take to achieve your major definite purpose?

### Identifying Your Core Values

Core values define how you want to live your life. For many years, I could not understand why I

was unable to get the lawyers who worked for me to share my values. Then I realized that you don't create core values; you discover them and gain a deep understanding. Looking inward, I have discovered that my core values are:

- Honesty, integrity, ethics, and respect;
- To relentlessly search for better ways to serve my clients;
- Always learning and striving to get better;
- Commitment to excellence in work;
- Having fun;
- Stewardship—holding something in trust, choosing service over self-interest;
- Providing client-centered service with highly trained people and optimal use of technology;
- Inspiring lawyers and staff and providing the maximum opportunities for them;
- Recognizing the uniqueness of each individual and cherishing differences;
- Free, open, and honest communication;
- Family focus and support;
- Maintaining health and fitness (as I get older this one is becoming a challenge).

What are your core values?

### **Roles: Life And Career Responsibilities**

I learned from Stephen Covey to plan my life around my roles and responsibilities. He suggested that we ask, "What is the most important thing I can do this week in each of my roles and responsibilities?" Over time my roles and responsibilities have changed, but here are my current ones:

- Husband;
- Father;
- Son;
- Brother;
- Fit and healthy person (taking a yoga class now);
- Coach and mentor for lawyers;
- Writer.

What are your life and career roles and responsibilities?

### **Using Time Wisely**

Why have a plan? Do you belong to Costco or Sam's Club? If so, do you ever go without a list? When I do, I take more time, spend more money, buy things I do not need and forget to buy things I do need. Without a plan you waste time and energy, and those are your most precious assets.

To use your limited time most effectively you must have a plan. It will help you to:

- Prioritize;
- Focus;
- Execute.

There is great evidence supporting the conclusion that people with written goals and a plan to achieve them are far more likely to be successful and happy about their careers and life. There are simply not enough hours in the day to engage in every career and business development opportunity that presents itself.

### **Investment Of Non-Billable Time**

When you decide how many non-billable hours you will invest in a year on your career, break them down as follows:

- Administrative;
- Client development;
- Your development.

### **Goals**

Why set goals? Really successful people set goals and have a plan to achieve them. Goals actually cause you to be more focused and to stretch beyond what you would otherwise achieve. As Brian Tracy put it, "Any system or blueprint for success is better than none at all. Think on paper." Have you written down your goals? If not, when will you do it? Here are some steps to follow:

- *Brainstorm.* Sit down and brainstorm with yourself and write potential goals;
- *Prioritize your goals.* Rank them in order of importance. Decide which is the most important and so forth;

- *Why are they important?* Just like with your major definite purpose, you need to ask yourself why achieving a particular goal is important. If you do not have a good answer to the “why” question, then you won’t have the discipline and the commitment to achieve the goals;
- If you don’t have a good reason for the “why” question, you will likely give up the first time there is a roadblock. You have to have a good answer to the “why” question to motivate you, energize you and cause you to have the discipline and commitment to achieve the goal;
- *Challenges.* What do you need to overcome to achieve your goals? Challenges are generally of our own making, not your firm’s or other outsiders. The challenges can be internal or external. In my experience most of them are internal. In other words, I have to do something different than I have been doing. My greatest challenge is usually staying focused and not wasting time;
- *Who can help?* Now that you have identified obstacles, identify who can help you achieve your goal. Here is an interesting thing to consider. When you are not taking responsibility for your career success, no one wants to help you. But, when you are taking responsibility for your success, you will find people who do want to help you, both inside and outside your firm;
- *Develop your action items steps.* Write down as many actions as you can think of to achieve your goal. After you have your list, for each goal write down something you can do in the next week to get started. We need for the train to get out of the station;
- *90-day goals.* It is very important to break down your goals into smaller pieces. Decide what you

want to accomplish in the next 90 days, write the actions down and share them with someone. Then, each week write down what you want to do that week towards your 90-days goals.

What are your goals? Why is achieving them important? What are the obstacles you will have to overcome? Who can help? What are the actions you want to take? What do you want to accomplish in the next 90 days? What steps will you take next week?

### **Development Plan For 2009**

Here is an approach I have used to do my planning. I do a top-down approach, starting with my goals and a bottom-up approach, starting with the non-billable time I am willing to commit:

- Determine how much time you plan to commit to non-billable activities over the next year. Then determine how much of that time you will spend on your professional development, office/administrative activities, pro bono services and client development. For each category, prepare a draft list of action items you could do in the allocated time.

• Weekly plan—how you spend your time weekly. There are 168 hours in a week. Suppose you sleep 56 hours and bill 40. Then suppose you spend 10 hours a week on your development, client development, and administrative tasks. That leaves 62 waking hours for your personal life. How you spend your non-billable time will determine the quality of your career and how you spend your 62 hours of personal time will determine the quality of your life. As discussed above, take your 90-day goals and outline what you plan to do each week, estimate the time you will spend, and actually put it on your calendar.

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## Develop Relationships/Business

Increasingly, firms are requiring lawyers to demonstrate that they can bring in new clients and retain and expand the relationship with existing clients. Your firm may have told you for years to just focus on billable work and not worry about bringing in any business and then as you became a more senior associate the focus began to change. In my career, we have been through four aspects of client development:

- Doing good work;
- Unsolicited contacts;
- Web sites/branding;
- Being remarkable, extraordinary, and memorable in the eyes of potential clients.

While he does not focus on law, Seth Godin is a marketing guru. He says you can't market to everyone. I absolutely agree. If you market to everyone you market to no one. You have to create something remarkable, extraordinary, and memorable that your target market and referral sources will talk about. To do that you will need to narrow your focus to a target market.

Godin also points out that there are three kinds of potential clients. The first does not need your service. The second needs your service and knows who you are, but they are using someone else. The third needs your service but does not know who you are. You can't market directly to the second and third categories. That means brochures and cold calls won't work. Instead the idea is to get them to come to you.

We live in a time in which, to clients, most law firms look alike and so do lawyers. Law firms claim to be full service, representing big companies and small and being focused on client service. Clients do not believe what law firms say. You have to stand out from the crowd and be remarkable or extraordinary in some way. That means you have to understand your potential clients' needs better than your competitors do. Clients want help solving their problems, achieving their opportunities and

dealing with internal and external changes. Clients want to hire lawyers in whom they can have confidence. What does it take to demonstrate that confidence? I find lawyers who are successful at building client relationships have these attributes:

- Burning desire;
- Really caring;
- Expecting more of themselves;
- High energy;
- Inspiring confidence;
- Passion;
- Empathy;
- Risk-taking;
- Patience;
- Persistence; and
- Client focus.

## Build A Team

In *Aligning the Stars*, Jay Lorsch and Thomas Tieney put it succinctly: "Over time the people you pay are more important than the people who pay you." So associates are asking: "What's in it for me to work with \_\_\_\_\_?" Why should a younger associate want to work for you? Here are my thoughts on how teams are built.

First, team builders find a way to align the team goals with the individual aspirations of their players. Second, they realize they cannot motivate the unmotivated. Instead, they focus on finding the motivation their players already have and tapping into it.

There comes a time in every lawyer's career when he or she needs to delegate work and supervise other lawyers. For me the need occurred when I was able to generate more work than I could do myself. None of us are taught supervisory skills in law school or how to delegate work. As a result, we learn by trial and error. I learned that I had to be willing to relinquish control and take more time to develop the junior lawyer's skills. At first, it took more time than if I just did the project myself.

I hope the thoughts below will help young lawyers avoid the error part of delegating. To delegate work a lawyer must:

- Define the project that needs to be completed and establish a deadline and make sure both are understood by the junior lawyer;
- Make sure the junior lawyer has the training to be able to do his or her work and, if not, take the time up-front to do the training;
- Provide all the necessary information/documents needed to do the project;
- Have an open-door policy so the junior lawyer is comfortable asking questions;
- Ask for periodic reports to make sure the junior lawyer is on track or simply ask how it is going;
- If possible, let the junior lawyer listen to telephone conferences or attend meetings about the project, even if the time is not billable;
- No matter how small the junior lawyer's portion of the project is, let him or her know that what they are doing really matters;

- Ask the junior lawyer what he or she learned from working on the project.

**CONCLUSION** • I love a quote attributed to Justice Harry A. Blackmun: “A wedding is an event; a marriage is an achievement.” Landing on the moon was an event. Maintaining the inspiration is an achievement. Making partner is an event; being a successful partner is an achievement. What can you learn about achievement from Tiger Woods? Really successful people are constantly getting better. Tiger Woods is a great example. A couple of years ago he was interviewed by Ed Bradley on *60 Minutes*. Ed Bradley asked Tiger Woods why he had completely changed his golf swing when he was the number one golfer in the world. Tiger Woods answered: “I knew I could get better.” There is a commonly heard phrase that if you are not getting better, you are actually getting worse. That has never been more true for lawyers than it is today because there are so many changes going on in our profession. So, each and every day, strive to learn more and to become a better lawyer for your clients.

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