

Why Associates Do Not Set Goals

I have set goals since childhood. When I was young, I set goals related to my sports activities, such as free throw percentage in basketball, strike outs and earned run average in baseball, and average yards per carry in football. When I started law school, my goal was to finish in the top five of my class. When I became a lawyer, my first goals centered on what I wanted to learn and what I wanted to experience. I remember one year I wanted to have five jury trials. Having goals motivated me, stretched me and forced me to prioritize my activities.

Because I owe so much of my success and career satisfaction to having goals and working to achieve them, I struggled when I learned many, if not most, associates do not set goals or have career development plans. Naively, I assumed all associates would enjoy setting goals, having a plan and working to achieve them. I learned the hard way that I was wrong when I conducted workshops on career planning and how to prepare a Personal Performance and Development Plan throughout our firm. I also instructed mentors to help associates set goals and develop their plans, only to learn that the vast majority of our mentors did not have written goals and saw little value in having a written plan. I truly wanted to understand, so I asked associates to share with me their perceptions. Once I began listening, I learned a great deal that later helped me put a different “spin” on goal setting.

In each firm there is a group of associates who do not set goals because they view work with their firm to be just that -- work. They do not think about their career so there is little reason to set goals. Many do not want to become a partner or may not even want to practice law over the long term. They simply want to do their work and go home each day. No matter how much training or coaching one of these associates receives, it is not likely he or she will ever see the value of setting goals.

At any point in time there are associates who would like to set goals, but are overwhelmed by their day-to-day work and choose not to add to their burden by planning or investing in their career. As John Lennon once said: “Life is what happens while you're making other plans.” In this case, work happens preventing associates from focusing on their future. This is not a permanent affliction. It comes and goes. This group of associates finds it difficult to think long-term when they are buried in work with partners barking at them to get something done.

Some associates do not see the value of setting goals. They look at senior lawyers in their section who have never set goals and think those lawyers are doing well. These associates are unable to see how they will benefit from setting goals. Several in this group determine that the way to get ahead in their firm is to “attach themselves” to a well thought of partner in the firm and let that partner sponsor them. In their view there is little career planning to do other than figuring out how to keep their sponsor pleased with their work.

Most first and second year associates don't know how to set goals or what their goals should be. In law school, goals were easy -- get good grades and get a good job. As first or second year associates there are an infinite number of potential goals and just starting to think of

the many possibilities is like climbing Mount Everest. They have no idea where to start or what to achieve at the end. Many are questioning everything, including whether they have made the right career choice. They are just trying to survive. Getting their work done and contending with the different personalities of their supervising attorneys is about the extent of their planning process. Thinking about the long term is foreign to them.

Setting goals is a difficult process. To set goals, an associate must look within himself or herself and uncover what he or she really wants. Many associates are uncomfortable looking within themselves. They know how to please others -- parents, teachers, law professors, bar examiners and partners, but do not know what they really want. Sitting down and writing out what they want to achieve in the short-term as well as the long-term is daunting and often leads to a feeling of helplessness. Achieving goals requires a commitment of time and energy, and willingness to take a risk.

Over time law firms have contributed to associates not settling goals. The message associates receive is that achieving billable hours is the only thing that matters. Partners subtly, and not so subtly, make the point repeatedly. Bonuses are set based on "billable hours." How many firms have spikes of billable hours at the bonus levels? Associates are laid off because they do not have enough "billable hours." Attending "training" sessions is perceived to be a waste of time because it takes away from "billable hours." When associates return to the office from a pro bono effort, community service or client development meeting, they are sometimes made to feel they are not carrying their share of the load.

Some associates become disillusioned by the mentoring process. They anticipate their mentor will help them in career planning and they have high expectations when they select their mentor, only to have those expectations dashed when the sole mentoring activity is lunch at the firm's expense. Many mentors do not take time to explain how they achieved their success, much less work with associates to help them achieve success.

Partners in some firms undermine the process by putting people down. An associate would never share goals with these kind of partners out of fear of being ridiculed. No one wants to be ridiculed by a partner either to his face or behind his back.

What should a law firm do?

I believe strongly law firms and associates both gain something meaningful by having associates focus on their career and in the process set goals, establish a plan to achieve them and then execute the plan. Bill Catlette and Richard Hadden are the authors of a book titled: *Contented Cows Give Better Milk*. Helping associates take responsibility for their career is all about creating contented cows. Better yet, helping them establish goals can energize them to achieve the goals they set.

Here is my list of what a law firm can do:

- Make sure there is an alignment of leadership, purpose, strategy, core values, culture and systems that includes goal setting. If the leadership

does not support it, it is not part of the strategy. Or, if it is contrary to the firm's culture, it probably won't happen.

- Clearly articulate what is expected of mentors and why; and then train the mentors. Mentors should help associates set goals, help them prepare a plan and then meet with them regularly to go over how they are doing. Include mentoring in evaluating bonuses and compensation for partners.
- If the firm values associate development and associate investment in their careers, communicate that message clearly and then reflect it in associate bonuses and feedback. If the firm does not value it, persuade associates they are at best limiting their career by not investing non-billable time in themselves.
- Help associates see the value of setting goals and then train them how to set them. Be able to convey that goals are a means to career success and satisfaction. I explain to associates that I selfishly set goals because I know I am responsible for my career happiness and success. Goals help me prioritize what is important to me and help me focus on work-life balance. Goals also give me a sense of freedom and independence, especially as I develop my own clients. I also explain that a great deal of the value is actually the process of setting goals and thinking about the future.
- Conduct workshops for associates on goal setting and career planning as part of orientation and then a second workshop at the beginning of their fourth year.
- Have mentors find out from associates what is important to them and what they value. It is the beginning step to setting goals.
- Convey to first and second year associates that their goals need to focus on what they want to learn and experience. If the firm has a shadowing program the goals may include the shadowing they want to do.
- When associates set goals, have them write a paragraph on why they want to achieve it and have them brainstorm all the things they need to do to achieve it.
- Prepare different Personal Development and Performance Plan templates for the 1-3 year associates than the 4-7 year associates.
- Once the plans are drafted, follow up. As David Maister has said, "once a person has announced his or her goals to another person, the other person has 'nagging rights.'"