



ATTORNEY SEARCH

First Things First: Build Your Legal Career from the Inside Out

“Get a better recruiter.” “Get a better ‘job.’” “Go in-house.” “Take anything.” “Take only ‘the best.’” If you are an attorney in transition or contemplating a career move, these little commands, and many more just like them, are likely running through your mind. Incessantly. Therein lies the rub: how to sort out the wheat from the chaff, how to unearth your (real!) personal goals, how to create and execute a successful plan.

There is a well-traveled quote often attributed (incorrectly) to Nelson Mandela, but actually written by New Age author Marianne Williamson. You must have heard it. It begins, “Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate, but that we are powerful beyond measure,” and continues, “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, handsome, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?” If the sentiment behind these words is true—and I believe that it is—then how do we get some of that “inner wonderfulness” out in the open and actually doing some good—and how about right now?!

Well, first things first. In order to begin realizing our innate talents, each of us needs a guiding force, an organizing principle, a motivating vision. Why? The simple fact is that our minds are made to rationalize, to analyze, to make conclusions—24/7, 365 days a year. However, if we don’t rein in that process, give it structure, and find a way to prioritize our thoughts, we will make hasty, conflicting, or worse, self-defeating decisions. How can we do this?

Indulge me in an analogy. How does a general on the field make tactical decisions in the face of incomplete or, more likely these days, overwhelming amounts of information about the enemy and about the enemy’s strengths? He does so by knowing the strengths and weakness of his own troops. He knows when they last ate—and whether they liked the food. He knows how far he can push them—and how to do it. He knows how to motivate them. He understands the internecine struggles within his command structure. He knows who the up-and-comers are, and he knows which of his lieutenants is lazy or burned out. In summary, he has a thoroughgoing knowledge and interest in his and his army’s capabilities, goals, and limitations. Thus, knowing his enemy and his mission is not enough; he has to know what raw materials he can work with to achieve his mission. Only if he can put all of the foregoing knowledge together in a coherent framework can he then formulate and execute a winning strategy.

Your career search is much like waging a military operation and requires the same level of attention to your capabilities, desires, motivations, and limitations. In short, it is not enough to “know the market.” In addition, you must follow the injunction: Know thyself!

Let’s stop right there. I am willing to wager that many of you may be thinking you don’t have time for frivolous psychobabble. Instead, you may think that you simply need to get on the stick, get out there, and land that job. In a way, you would be right. You do not have any time to waste. I would draw a different conclusion, however: *You do not have time to waste taking action without first getting to know yourself.* Life is short; spend your time wisely.

Okay, if you have followed me this far, go with me a little further. Here is what you really need to know before you can put pen to paper and write up your career-transition plan (and you are going to write one!). First, you need to spend some time thinking about your last career experience. What did you learn? What did you really do? How well did you do it? How did you work together with the others on your team? What skills did you wish you had developed? In short, you need to give yourself a comprehensive career review, and you need to be brutally honest. By the way, "brutally honest" does not mean "knee-jerk negative"; neither does it mean "wearing rose-colored glasses." Take the middle road. Try to be objective, and try to think about what you did, rather than how you feel about it. There is a difference.

Second, take the time to free associate, and then write down what you really want out of your career. What is your motivating fantasy about yourself? Do you see yourself making X per year; living in a certain place; or having a certain circle of friends, a certain type of practice, or a particular environment for your work? You need to identify these.

Third, take stock. Ask yourself what it is about these visions of yourself that attracts you. What do they say about how you prefer to work and what kind of work you like to do? Further, what does all of this information tell you about your already-stated career goals? Are they in alignment? If they are, that's great. You may likely find, however, that you have learned something important about yourself and about why you were not as successful as you wanted to be or what kind of success you are looking for in the future. Or both. Regardless, the deeper you can drill down, the better off you will be, and the more accurate and profound your conclusions will be.

When you can answer all of the above, you will be on the fast track to putting it all together. Coming to the point where you know what you want and why you want it will take all of the fear and mystery out of the "how" question. Why? Because you are a lawyer, dammit! You know how to analyze and how to problem-solve. You just may not have known how to place that problem-solving ability in the correct context. Once you have gained a deeper level of self-knowledge, that will the time to let the amazing power of your mind run free; that 24/7 machine will be able to start doing something besides spinning. Instead, it can begin to weave a dream, a plan, a vision for a great new future. Frankly, lawyers are not known for their introspection and self-awareness. Be the exception. And succeed.

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