

## Advice to New Partners

Consider the poignant scene in Hamlet, when Laertes prepares to leave his beloved Denmark and the life that he has known there to go off to France. The words of his father Polonius, ring true as you take on the role of a new partner:

*This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.*

Being a new partner is what I would call Phase I in a cycle of change for yourself. We need to learn the patterns of change, and we need to learn how to manage our lives and our careers amid this pattern of change.

As Tom Tierney, formerly the worldwide Managing Director of Bain & Co. said, "Fundamentally, it's about building a life and not a resume, and in order to do that, you have to be clear on your purpose, you have to be clear on your sense of values, you have to be clear on what is meaningful to you and what will create significance. Your challenge is not only to earn a living, but to create meaning through your work."

It is the journey and not the destination that counts. Be open to surprises and complexities.

### The "Roller-Coaster" Rule

New partners should know the context of their [legal careers](#). And the context can be explained in a few key ideas. [The first idea is that the rules are changing](#). Constant change is the one thing you can count on these days. And let's face it: few professionals are well-versed in the language of change. People are changing careers, they are changing locations, they are changing relationships, and we even see continuously shifting values.

Even the rules of hard work are changing. We all believe in hard work; it used to be an automatic gateway to permanent security and success. But now there is no guarantee that your life will improve because of the quality of the work that you do. Your past doesn't predict your future success. You have to aim at goals and be ready to relinquish them if the rules change.

Another thing to understand is that you almost have to let go of the linear rule of life that has brought you to where you are today. It worked well in a stable, slow-moving, non-technical society, but in the 21st century, it is a rule that does not work at all. The linear rule requires features that we don't often see in our work environments these days. Linear careers, lifetime employment models, a stable society and an ability to forecast and predict the future.

Instead of the linear rule, we might want to think about embracing what we call "the roller coaster rule." We don't necessarily have to love this rule, but we do have to accept it. When you examine your life and your career, you will observe that you have experienced many high points and many low points. Although our lives and careers are filled with peaks and valleys, we are only trained to get to the peaks. We also need to learn how to live in the valleys. The "up" times are good times, the wonderfully challenging times when money, connections, client relationships, rewards and living one's dreams all come together.

Making partner is an up time. Be wary, however, inevitably, like the roller coaster, you are bound to go down at some point--and how you handle those down times becomes very critical in your life. The down times are about letting go of what isn't working and finding new ways of doing things. These are transition times when you should be seeking advice from others, looking to your own insights and really being true to yourself, a time when you should devote your energies to deciding how you want to reorient your life.

## If the Doldrums Hit

Becoming a new partner is a "go for it" period and it is a period of stability. Phase I represents the challenges that come to a person who has worked really hard to get where she is going and who is really willing to put in what it takes to gain a sense of achievement. What is critical for you at this point is to identify your own purpose. What is your vision for yourself? What are the values that you want to hold on to? What is really important to you at this time? You also want to remember that it is time to really create a plan. And at this point in your life, your focus should be on building a life, not merely a resume. And you should be actively designing a life plan for yourself in terms of how you will manage your career as you move from possibly an up time into a down time.

You also want to identify those relationship that are important to you both at home and at work and elicit the support of others as you transition into this period of success in your life.

Phase I usually lasts as long as the work that you are doing is challenging, of high standards, and provides opportunities for growth. But what I hear frequently from those who have gone before you on this journey, there comes a point where all of a sudden the excitement of being a partner may slip into the routine of being a partner, and once you get to a point where work becomes routine, you don't feel like you are challenging yourself.

There are all kinds of reasons for this. The feelings that exist in this stage sometimes are feelings of a sense of decline. You may feel a little trapped by the amount of work that you have and the nature of the work that you have. You may also feel trapped because you don't feel that there are enough support or resources to get the work done.

The essential skills at this point are really to look at what is going on and choose a route for yourself that will help you regain some of the positive feelings of an earlier stage of your life, not to go back, but to consider what aspects of your past you want to take into the future. You should also recognize at this point that this is probably a mini-career transition and that everybody does go through this cycle of renewal and the cycle of change. And, you have two choices, either to stay and get stuck in a set of doldrums about your career, or move out of this cycle by looking for new challenges and new areas. It doesn't mean looking for a new profession but looking for new ways to enhance your **current practice**.

This is where many partners get stuck, and this is where they then begin to have productivity problems. And what is required at this stage is to enhance, learn new skills, develop a broader portfolio, take on more management and leadership responsibilities and make sure that your home life is aligned with your work life. It is probably one of the greatest opportunities for continuous evaluation of your life and career. During this phase, you do want to make a quick turnaround, and you do want to get back into gear. However, if you find that you can't make a quick turnaround and that you really are beginning to ask yourself significant and deeper questions, what you may find is that it is time to do a complete inventory of your home and work life and really begin to restructure and reshape the direction of your career.

And that is what I would call moving into a major transformation or really coming to terms with your professional identity and with your personal and professional identity. You know you're ready for that when you really begin to ask some fundamental questions. What do I hold on to? What do I let go of? What do I take on?

## What Do You Really Want?

The third phase if you start asking yourself the serious questions is what I call a time where you really come to terms with yourself. It is your solo time. It is a time in a career where you feel quiet, you want to explore new ways to do things, you want to reconstruct what you are doing, reconstruct your practice, maybe expand it, maybe experiment with it. It is a time also of becoming introspective, and it's a time to really focus in on yourself. Most professionals tend to be selfless and make extreme sacrifices for their work, for their clients, for

their firm, and frequently they don't take the time to take care of themselves. If those tough questions keep coming up, if the doldrums keep coming up, if you are continuously feeling trapped, angry, disenchanted, resentful, then it is time to move in, I think to a Phase III where you really do come to terms with what it is you want to do with the rest of your life. The essential skills here lie in coming to terms with work on your terms, not on others' terms, and this can be a very exciting time in one's career.

Once you come to grips with what it is your really want and you want to do it on your terms, you enter into a very predictable fourth phase in your career which is getting ready and a time for experimenting in your career. It's a time for taking on new clients, it's a time for expanding your work, it's a time for letting the routine parts of your practice go to maybe younger associates, it's a time for taking on maybe more leadership within the firm. It really is your time to explore, experiment, get some new training and discover other talents that you may not have used for years.

This Phase IV is an exciting time because all of the sudden you feel purposeful again, you're more active, you're preparing for more challenges and you are continuously learning, and you somehow get back into the Phase I of go-for-it again.

### Sailing Ahead

Every successful professional has gone through adversity. Some people work through the adversity and come out the other side better for it, while others let the adversity get them down and keep them from moving forward. [If you talk to some of your older partners, you will see that those who worked through the adversity are truly leaders of the firm today](#) and those who let themselves get trampled by the adversity are the partners who are sitting in their offices angry, cynical, depressed, causing all kinds of troubles around the firm. How you choose to live your life as a partner is totally up to you.

To survive in a leadership role in today's workplace, you always have to keep a perspective. Take the time to reflect on where you are. See the whole of your career and not just the tactical day-to-day events.

Relationships are critical, [particularly in law firms that pride themselves on consensus and collegiality](#) (even though that's more rhetoric than reality in some firms). As a young partner, it is critical that you find partners who are truly your partners, that you find those with whom you can relate and discuss things. It is also critical to understand who may stand in your way of achieving your goals.

As a new partner, it becomes very critical to learn the skill of taking work off your shoulders, learning the arts both of delegation and planning for work, because you can't get rid of work if you don't know how to organize it.

It is also important to anchor yourself. Distinguish your professional identity as a lawyer from who you are as a person. Know yourself and love yourself. Know what strengths you bring to the legal professional, and know your weaknesses. Know how you want to grow and change.

Find confidantes outside of your firm whom you can talk to honestly and openly, who do not have a self interest in what you decide. Have people outside of the firm who can give you an objective opinion about yourself, your firm, your role within the firm, the nature of your work.

Perhaps the words of Mark Twain say it best: "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did. Throw off the bow lines, sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Imagine. Discover who you really are and what is most important in your life."