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"There's a Reason It's Called the 'Practice' of Law"

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A guy walks up to a lady on a New York City street and asks, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" And the lady says, "Practice, young man. Practice."

That joke, old as it may be, has a lot to tell us about being a great lawyer. As a partner charged with developing the talent of young lawyers who work with me, and as the mother of an aspiring tennis star, I've been giving a lot of thought to what makes a champion. Is it nature, or is it nurture? The answer, it turns out, is nurture. Thank goodness.

A five-year study by researchers at the University of Chicago showed that the best determiner of what makes a champion isn't natural talent. It's drive, supplemented by early exposure, parental support and practice, practice, practice. Granted, this study was published two decades ago, but its findings are similar to those of a Florida State University researcher, whose "Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance" was published last month.

The Chicago researchers looked at 120 of the nation's top artists, athletes and scholars and concluded that very few of them were prodigies in their field. Many, in fact, reported being unexceptional at it. They nevertheless, with ample amounts of parental support, dedicated themselves to excelling at their chosen field and, after years of hard work and practice, mastered it.

What does all this have to do with lawyering? Quite a bit. Mastery of the law isn't easy. But neither is becoming an Olympic-level swimmer or a Nobel Prize-winning mathematician. The same skills that create a great athlete or a groundbreaking scientist are the same ones needed to become a proficient lawyer: a commitment to being the best, the drive to do what it takes to get there and the willingness to practice, practice, practice.

Another important component of success, according to the Florida State researchers, is doing what you love, because if you don't love it, you are unlikely to work hard enough to get good. Because most people tend to dislike doing things they aren't good at, they often give up, believing they aren't talented. But what they really lack isn't talent -- it's drive.

So, if you're looking to become a great lawyer, the only person who can make that happen is staring back at you in the mirror.

ONWARD AND UPWARD

The good news for women lawyers is that drive, determination, practice -- all those things are gender neutral. There's nothing inherently manly about hard work. Granted, men often have a leg up in this arena, given their typically exclusive access to the old boys' club, not to mention their early and ongoing involvement in sports and the competitive spirit it inspires.

Nevertheless, women have proven themselves to be every bit as driven and determined as their male counterparts. That is, until their drive to succeed runs head-on into the desire to have a family. There are only 24 hours in a day, and children, husband and home often find themselves battling it out with client and boss for attention.

There are no easy answers to this quandary. Some law firms try valiantly -- and, unfortunately, mostly vainly -- to solve it by offering flexible work schedules and the like. But clients and their legal problems are rarely sympathetic to such things as a child's ear infection or a soccer tournament.

The problem many women lawyers face is that while trying to be an excellent lawyer and an excellent wife and mother, they end up being lousy at all three. So many, fed up with the exhaustion and the frustration, throw in the towel and leave the profession altogether.

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My recommendation to anyone considering that is to stop, take a deep breath and see if there's another way. If your firm offers any kind of alternative schedule, explore it. At the very least, if you can find a way to work as a contract lawyer, do that. Stay in the loop. Keep up with the law, the technology, the office gossip.

You may yearn for the ability to spend hour after hour gazing at your toddler's beautiful face or waiting in the carpool line now, but in a few months, you'll wish to spend just a few hours in a nice suit in an office where nobody will follow you into the bathroom.

The best news about your chosen field -- the law -- is that, in one important way, it is the polar opposite of athletics: Age doesn't mean obsolescence. In fact, most clients feel more comfortable if their lawyers have a few gray hairs.

Women lawyers who sideline their professional ambitions temporarily to focus on their domestic ambitions don't have to sideline their careers completely -- or permanently. True, by working at a reduced schedule, your (usually) male colleagues who stay in the game full time will advance higher and faster than you will. That's to be expected.

But if you love it -- and most of us do -- making it to the top, regardless of the timing, is still worth it.

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