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"The Secret of My Success"

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Forget About Sucking Up and Get to Work.

Another lawyer asked me the other day how I'd "made it" in the legal profession. It struck me as an incredibly strange question. First of all, I never thought of myself as having "made it." Not only does it seem to imply that I'm now spending all my time lounging on the beach, but it is also at odds with a world in which every day holds tasks and problems that are not only extremely interesting, but also difficult and time-consuming.

Nevertheless, her question got me thinking about how and why I've stuck with it for so long. And the answer I came up with was disarmingly simple: I've never been obsessed with my *career*, but I've always been a stickler about my *work*.

Not to make too sweeping a generalization, but it's a distinction that is often lost on the newest generation of lawyers.

Every year, I talk to new lawyers about some simple rules on making the most of their legal careers. Chief among the purely anecdotal wisdom I impart: Don't worry so much about your legal careers. I tell them that not because I don't want them to stick around long enough to make partner, but because many lawyers mistakenly assume that the best way to ensure their spot in the partnership ranks is by politicking, brown-nosing and learning how to "work the system."

The best way to ensure a long and successful career in the legal profession is to be an excellent lawyer. And the way to do that is to focus on the work sitting on your desk right now, not the brass ring that may or may not be in your future. And given that the chances of making partner at some firms these days are just slightly better than making it to the NBA, a lawyer who has spent her associate years mastering her craft is in a much better place than the associate who has spent his first six years in the practice taking short cuts, worrying how to make people happy and sucking up to senior partners.

At least for me, the satisfaction I get from doing interesting work, and that I'm doing it to the best of my abilities, has not only given me the drive to remain in the profession, but it's also helped my career.

When I started practicing law, I didn't think I would ever be partner. It's not that I didn't think I was up to snuff, it's just that I wasn't preoccupied with that particular goal. My colleagues who did obsess over it though, either didn't make partner or, once they were there, were disappointed because it wasn't just big offices and comfy chairs.

Being partner, for those of you aspiring to be one, means all the work of being an associate but more of the responsibility. Sure, it means more money and a little more flexibility, and that's nice. But it also means you're responsible for bringing in business, training young associates and participating in firm management. It's a brass ring, admittedly. But it's merely the beginning of another phase in one's legal career, not an end in itself.

Sound Advice

Some of the best advice I or any lawyer can give to those starting in the profession is, coincidentally, contained in a top 40 hit, "Everybody's Free (to Wear Sunscreen)." The song actually began as a column by the *Chicago Tribune's* Mary Schmich, and it extols the virtues of life's mundanities, like wearing sunscreen and regular flossing. The gist of the advice is

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not to worry about your "standing" in life relative to your peers, but to do the best you can; the rest will take care of itself.

Anyone over the age of 40 can appreciate the wisdom in these words, and it should be required reading for all young lawyers. The fact that Schmich's words (originally attributed to Kurt Vonnegut) are now being devoured by teens is a true indication that such simple advice transcends generational boundaries.

The young attorneys who are fixated on whether they're "on track" for partnership remind me of the kids I knew in high school who always wanted to know if what the teacher was droning on about was going to be "on the test." While those students may have made good grades, they didn't leave school any smarter than when they started. They didn't take the opportunity to learn, which is the opportunity associates are being given when they join any firm.

The practice of law is a craft. And it's a craft that takes years to master. I spent my first five years as a lawyer hyperventilating whenever a partner would give me an assignment that I had no idea how to complete. Of course, I hyperventilated behind closed doors, and it was only a prelude to many, many hours of work, but I hyperventilated nonetheless.

It wasn't until I had been a lawyer for half a dozen years or so that I started to get it. That meant taking ownership of every task I was handed, and not relinquishing it until I knew it was so clean that the partner who assigned it to me could eat off of it.

My attitude wasn't anything special. Lawyers are paid an obscene amount for what we do. If being satisfied with nothing short of pristine work seems strange, you are probably in the wrong profession.