

Five Success Strategies for Women Lawyers

By Jitrine Bentsi-Enchill

Billables, meetings, clients, cases, kids and chaos! This is just a fraction of what many women lawyers deal with on a daily basis. Most women lawyers are required to deal with many more personal and professional challenges than their male counterparts. Let's face it...the legal profession is still dominated by men. Women are often left out of the loop in their work environments where the old boy network is not ready to see the value that women bring to the profession.

Nonetheless, there are five critical strategies that a busy woman lawyer can use in order to build a successful and gratifying law career on her terms.

1. DEVELOP A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Success doesn't happen by accident. You must PLAN what you want to achieve and determine the best way to go about getting there. Setting up a career plan is the first and most important step in achieving a successful legal career. Keep in mind that your plan should be flexible enough to allow you to take advantage of unexpected opportunities.

Create a Vision.

Begin your plan by developing a vision for your professional life. Don't approach the visioning process with the typical lawyer type "worse case scenario" perspective. DREAM BIG! Don't focus on the "what ifs" or the "how's" right now.

Your vision will serve as a guide for the specific goals you'll ultimately set. Consider the following questions during your visioning process:

- What is your vision for your professional and personal life?
- What do you want to achieve?
- Do you hope to one day have your own practice, become partner, seek a judgeship or go into politics?
- What type of clients do you want to serve?
- What type of setting do you want to work in?

Set Goals.

Figure out what steps you'll need to take to fulfill your vision. These steps will serve as your goals.

Be sure to incorporate personal goals into your plan.

- Do you want to have a family?
- What kind of lifestyle do you want?
- What sort of hobbies and interests would you like to pursue?

Make sure to include goals that are also important to your employer.

This is a critical part of building a great professional reputation which is vital to career success. As soon as possible determine your organization's definition of a successful attorney. For example, identify your firm's spoken and unspoken criteria for becoming a partner, whether you want to make partner or not. Focusing on your organization's performance expectations will provide you with critical information to build into your plan. Build a great reputation by exceeding the expectations of your employer on a regular basis.

Reassess.

Finally, a Career Development Plan is a document that you'll refer back to at least once every quarter. It's important to assess your progress and determine if anything needs to be tweaked. Be flexible with your plan. As your life changes and new opportunities emerge, you may discover that you will want to adjust your particular goals to effectively meet the opportunities and challenges that will inevitably come your way.

2. SELECT A MENTOR....OR TWO

Mentoring will play a vital role in the successful development of a woman's legal career. In most firms, there is a lot of "informal" mentoring that occurs between male attorneys. This mentoring is often between male partners and newer male associates. However, too often, women lawyers aren't the beneficiaries of such informal mentoring relationships. A recent report published by the Minority Corporate Council Association cited that sen-

ior male attorneys are uncomfortable mentoring women attorneys. According to the report published in 2003:

“Many male attorneys felt that it was too hard, uncomfortable or unduly complicated to be mentors to women. They feared that the female mentees and others in the organization might misperceive the mentoring relationships as more than simply professional. They were worried about possible claims or lawsuits for discrimination or sexual harassment. They worried that they might make remarks that could be misunderstood or taken out of context leading to a bad reputation for them and their firm. Several male attorneys felt that they could not understand career issues from a women’s perspective and therefore could not offer useful advice.” Mentoring Across Differences: A guide to Cross-Gender and Cross-Race Mentoring: Published by Minority Corporate Council Association.

It’s important therefore, that women lawyers be proactive and intentional about establishing mentoring relationships.

How Can a Mentor Help?

A mentor is someone with whom you can:

- Discuss your career plans and Career Development Plan
- Evaluate opportunities
- Facilitate key relationship building
- Work through professional challenges

Depending on your needs, you may decide to seek a mentor in or outside of your organization. Either way, before approaching a potential mentor, you’ll need to determine:

- What you hope to gain from a mentoring relationship
- What type of a mentor is best for helping you meet your objectives
- Whether the prospective mentor has the time, energy and commitment to serve as a mentor.

Be strategic about choosing a mentor.

Keep your Career Development Plan in mind and start by identifying your short-term career goals.

- Where do you see yourself in the next year or two?
- What knowledge, skills, and abilities do you need to get there?
- What key experiences could a mentor provide that would benefit you most?

Answers to these questions will help you identify the type of mentor that is right for you. For example, depending on your goals,

and where you are in your legal career, you may want to seek a highly experienced attorney whose career path you would like to learn from. Or, you may want a mentor closer to your level of experience, but who you feel could help you in very specific areas of growth and development.

Understand your role and responsibility as a mentee.

Consistently communicate appreciation for your mentor’s time as well as his or her dedication to your goals and success. Keep in mind that the role of the mentor is to challenge and encourage you but not to provide answers.

Finally, your relationship with your mentor should be personal and confidential. Your mentor should challenge and support you. The structure and frequency of meetings can be decided between you and your mentor. However, it is good practice to arrange a subsequent date before the close of a meeting to make sure that a regular review of progress is maintained. Gain all you can from the relationship and be prepared to be a mentor to a colleague or law student at some point in your career.

3. BALANCE IT OUT

Women lawyers report that the biggest obstacle to achieving a balanced life is the sheer number of hours that lawyers are required to work, in conjunction with family and personal responsibilities that often include aging parents, children and significant others. Although these challenges aren’t unique to women lawyers, the fact that women bear a disproportionate burden in the area of caregiving, results in added stress and pressure for women in the law. Here are some tools for achieving greater work/life balance:

1) Begin your balance journey by figuring out your values and priorities.

Yeah I know...feels like everything is a priority. Yet too often, our time and energy are spent on things that we don’t really care about. Once you are clear about your values and priorities you can begin saying “no” to those things that move you further away from your values, and priorities and “yes” to those things that are in alignment with your values.

2) Identify your balance “blockers.”

Balance blockers are those things that we either think or do that stand in the way of achieving balance. Some examples of blockers are:

- Living for the expectations of others at work and at home

- Consistently putting the needs of others before your own
- Fear of change
- Hung up on appearances
- Perfectionism

Once you identify your blockers, pay attention to when you use them as excuses to justify why you can't achieve balance in your life. Once you're aware of the specific things you do that prevent you from achieving balance, you can begin to make changes.

3) **Balance your mind.**

The key to balance is all in your head. Begin to *think* differently! So many women attorneys feel guilty about focusing on balance or they believe taking time out...away from work is an unproductive use of time. I'll tell you what I tell my coaching clients: **GET OVER IT!** Most times, we treat our cars better than we treat ourselves. What's the first thing we do when we notice our car is low on gas? We fill our tanks! Well, living a more balanced life is about filling *your* tank.

4) **Create "non-negotiable" time blocks in your schedule at least two times per week.**

Non-negotiable time is personal time that you set aside for yourself that you absolutely cannot and will not reschedule, cancel or postpone...it's simply non-negotiable. Devote at least 30 minutes to these time blocks. Write the non-negotiable appointment in your palm or day planner as you would any other appointment. Use the time for anything NON-work related.

5) **Consider hiring a Professional Coach who is familiar with the challenges of practicing law.**

When you're trying to achieve a more balanced life and everyone around you is being rewarded for working round the clock, it's tough to stay focused. The truth is making change that will affect you personally and professionally can be challenging...even when the change will be positive. This is primarily because familiar patterns are hard to break. The bottom line is that lawyers need someone to talk to. Not a partner in the firm, significant other, colleague or friend, but someone whose only job is to help you plan your career, manage your life and set goals to keep you on track.

4. **BRAND YOURSELF**

"You must give your own story to the world." Carter G. Woodson

Branding is about developing a systematic way of increasing your visibility and being intentional about how you develop your professional reputation. It's impossible to brand yourself without knowing who you are and how you're different from the "competition"...i.e. other lawyers. Therefore, your level of self-awareness is critical to building your brand. Before you can effectively brand and market yourself, you have to identify the following:

- What you have to offer
- How you are unique
- Your natural strengths
- The areas you need to develop

Determine your brand.

Next, based on this information, determine what you want to become "known" for in your work-place and within the legal community. Becoming "known" is about positioning yourself as an expert. For example, in working with a client of mine, we developed a strategy for her to first clarify an area of expertise. We then clarified how her skills and experience made her uniquely qualified and valued as an expert. Next we explored what professional organizations she could use as a platform for showcasing her expertise. After crafting a clear and consistent message, she began giving 20-30 minute presentations, volunteered for committee work in a related professional organization and wrote and published articles. Before long, she became the "go-to" person in her firm and a specialist in her field.

Get the news out.

As women we are occasionally hesitant to "blow our own horn" yet men do it all the time. In terms of developing your brand in your organization, here's an important tip: Treat your employer like a client. Your managing lawyers and partners are busy and can't keep track of what you've accomplished. Develop a file or portfolio that outlines your achievements and skill set. When appropriate, share this information with others; particularly those who are in leadership roles within your organization. This internal "marketing" will pay off and help you develop your brand internally.

Keep in mind that in the beginning, you will be the most effective communicator and marketer of your brand before others start catching on and spreading the word for you. So be willing to tell others what interests you, where you excel, and what you're passionate about.

As you begin the process of developing

your brand, be sure to consider the following:

- What will it take for you to communicate your brand?
- How can you position yourself as an expert within the legal community?
- What legal and non-legal organizations will you join?
- Where will you assume leadership positions?

By answering these questions you'll gain the necessary exposure you need to effectively communicate your unique brand.

5. MASTER YOUR TIME

As women lawyers we're often required to juggle things in the office as well as important issues outside of the office that directly impact our personal lives. Effective time management will directly impact your ability to successfully handle your work-load and your life. Throughout the day you'll have interruptions, deadlines, meetings, conference calls, motions, e-mails, client calls and much more. Developing a well functioning time management strategy will be vital in order for you to get through your day.

If you're a natural time manager, develop a system that works for you and stick to it. The key to time mastery is finding a system that helps you to increase efficiency. To become even more efficient be sure to plan how you'll use your time. Many of us fail to plan because we are action-oriented. We prefer to be in the thick of things doing, instead of thinking and planning. As a result, we react to whatever is happening around us at work. It's critically important to plan both your work and your personal time. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Results: What are my goals; what do I expect to accomplish?
2. Activities: What will I have to do to get those results?
3. Priorities: What are the priorities involved?
4. Time: How much time will each activity require?
5. Schedule: When will I do each activity?
6. Flexibility: How much flexibility must I allow for the unexpected things I can't control?

The first three questions will form a work plan and the last three questions form the foundation for a time plan. Both will be needed as you navigate your career and personal life.

NOTE: Most of us are connected to our daily "to-do" list as a daily time/work planning tool. Although daily planning is certainly worthwhile, weekly planning is even better. It provides a broader perspective and allows more room for options. You can use the same six questions to develop your weekly plan.

Conclusion

There are many formulas for building a successful career. Undoubtedly, a great recipe for success for women lawyers will include (1) A well articulated plan that addresses personal as well as professional issues, (2) A mentor who is committed to your success, (3) A commitment to creating and sustaining a balanced work life, (4) A well thought out plan of how to communicate your unique brand and finally, (5) an effective time management system.



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