

OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO CAREER CHANGE

*In honor and in memory of the author,
Deborah Arron, who helped thousands of
lawyers find career satisfaction.*

Even when we want change, we are sometimes resistant to it. The first step in moving past your resistance is to define what's good about where you are now. Even though you may dislike your work, or your unemployment, or your lack of a secure future, you may have plenty of reasons to maintain the status quo. Those reasons create resistance that mere dissatisfaction cannot budge. Instead of making a change, you complain to your friends, or resolve your criticism of your current situation by telling yourself, "Oh well, at least I'm employed." In the words of Portland lawyer-turned-psychologist, Standish McCleary, III, "We prefer the security of a known misery, to the misery of an unfamiliar insecurity."

You can also look at your resistance to change in the opposite way: What's so bad about where you're going? Peter C. Jenkins, a lawyer and consultant from Gaithersburg, Maryland, suggests making a detailed list of what it is you fear most. "Often what holds us back," he says, "is an undefined fear."

To identify your fears, answer the following questions:

- What am I afraid I'll lose?
- What is the worst ending I can imagine?
- What do I hope to gain?
- What would an ideal ending look like?
- Who will have to let go of what when the change occurs?

Now, synthesize your answers to the preceding questions into one or more specific barriers to change. These barriers may involve time, money, a feeling of insecurity, or some other barrier to change.

When you make a list of the fears that are holding you back, you can move on to think about dismantling them.

Oakland, California, career counselor Lesah Beckhusen identified four factors that distinguish lawyers who make significant changes in their work from those who don't:

- They know it's possible to make change happen in their lives because they have done it before, although not necessarily in their legal careers;
- They are so unhappy that the unknown becomes more appealing than the known;
- They have a clear objective that really interests them, and they have the time and resources to act upon the idea; and
- They have accepted the costs and losses involved in making the change.

Organizational systems experts have devised a simple formula for Beckhusen's observations: Your resistance to change will always equal or exceed your dissatisfaction. But once your dissatisfaction takes on a vision of something better, and you identify a first step toward achieving that vision, you'll always overcome your resistance. At that point you begin to move forward.

What the formula confirms is that no matter how unhappy you are with the status quo, all of your good reasons to stay put will keep you there until you are drawn to a new goal. Then, your barriers – financial or otherwise – will gradually (and sometimes magically) erode. When you can associate enough pleasure with the idea of achieving your new goal, you'll be motivated to attack the "barriers" that, until now, have held you back.

Some of you began reading this article because of a vision – a vision of a life improved. Although it may not feel like it, you've already begun to move past your resistance to change by taking a small

step. Now you need to continue to take more small steps to crystallize and achieve your vision.

The motivation to put resistance behind you develops in fairly predictable stages, according to researchers at the University of Rhode Island. The first is pre-contemplation – casually thinking about the change, but remaining unconvinced. The stage where you complain, but don't do much about the situation. It can last for many years without developing any apparent momentum.

The process then progresses to contemplation: "I'm going to do this in the next six months." This is the time to invest in self-assessment and reflection. The third stage starts full-blown preparation, which leads to the fourth stage, actual initiation of the change.

You can keep yourself in motion by asking yourself simple questions like these:

- Do I want to work these hours?
- Do I want to work with these people?
- What would be one step better than where I am now?

Sometimes, making minor alterations to your current situation will solve the problem, at least temporarily. "There are people who are unable to move to something new in one jump," says Chicago career counselor Sheila Nielsen, "but they can shift the rudder a little bit and get a sense of real relief."

To continue moving past your barriers, use self-assessment tools and work diligently through the exercises. Follow that introspection with job research. By the time you finish, you'll have turned your ambiguous notion of something better into a concrete description of the work that would best suit you.

Those of you who have burned out or become demoralized by your professional experiences may have to find time for renewed enthusiasm before you can move on. You may find value in reading the books on change listed in the sidebar on this page. If your barriers to change are so severe that you can't face the thought of looking at what you want right now, consider professional help. One lawyer put it this way:

Don't be afraid to go to a pro and say, "I've

got a problem." How do you think you get your clients? People have troubles; they come to a lawyer. Lawyers have troubles; they go to a psychologist or career counselor and say, "I want to get out of this but I don't know how to do it."

Deborah Arron

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