



# IN SIGHT

for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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## REVITALIZING YOUR PRACTICE

Professional satisfaction is an inspiring ideal, yet it also seems like an impossible dream to many lawyers. Too often, real life and the exigencies of law practice take precedence. There's a constant tension between personal and family needs, client demands, the economic realities of running a practice, and professional satisfaction. The effort to balance these tensions and reconcile the conflicts can become an enormous drain – physically, emotionally, and spiritually – leaving lawyers dissatisfied and unfulfilled. To transform your practice into one that is balanced, satisfying, and fulfilling, you must examine the sources of your dissatisfaction one by one.

A key source of dissatisfaction in life arises out of the “shoulds” we’ve internalized. Each of us has our own set of “shoulds,” and each “should” has corresponding “shouldn’ts.” We make choices based on them and experience fulfillment or dissatisfaction, success or failure, depending on whether we have met the expectations they create. Unfortunately, very few people are aware of their shoulds, fewer have questioned their validity, and fewer still have consciously chosen them. Yet they are the yardsticks against which we measure success or failure. Most dissatisfactions expressed by attorneys can be framed as shoulds.

Usually, we inherit our shoulds from our culture and our families. For example: “I should be making more money;” “I should be a partner by now;” “I should always be on top of my workload;” or “I shouldn’t have lost my temper;” “I shouldn’t have lost that client;” “I shouldn’t have missed

my kid’s soccer game;” and so on. These shoulds can be toxic when left unexamined because then you experience them as the “truth” rather than as a goal you’ve set for yourself. The difference is that goals are external to you – objective criteria you can alter or discard at will if they no longer work for your life. Your “truths,” on the other hand, are internal – standards that you unconsciously experience as a fixed, unalterable reality. When “I should be a partner by now” is the “truth,” not being a partner can only be experienced as failure, and failure is inherently dissatisfying.

Any discussion of professional satisfaction must also include professionalism. The OSB Statement of Professionalism asserts that professionalism “makes the practice of law more enjoyable and satisfying.” Just as we inherit our personal shoulds from our culture and our families, we inherit the concept of professionalism as another “should” during the process of becoming a lawyer. Often, we experience professionalism as separate from ourselves, rather than as part of who we are. Rarely do we stop to consider or address the “should” called professionalism.

Identifying your shoulds, questioning their viability, and actively choosing reasonable, attainable, and measurable goals is a critical step on the path to transforming your practice. In this personal process of self-examination, you begin by asking yourself questions about those areas of your life and your practice you would like to change or improve. For example: “What kind of practice do I want?” “Why am I drawn to criminal law when I’ve worked so hard to be a tax attorney?” “How much money do I need to make to be happy?”

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What characterizes this process, however, is not the answers, but the questions. Each answer becomes the basis for the next question. For example, if you answer the question, “What kind of practice do I want?” with “I want a small, part-time practice,” your next question would be, “Why do I want a small, part-time practice?” Your answer to that might be, “I want to spend as much time as possible with my kids while they’re young.” In addition to “Why do I want to spend as much time as possible with my kids while they’re young?” you might also ask yourself, “What do I mean by ‘young’?” and “What can I do right now to increase my time with my kids?” Continue to ask yourself probing follow-up questions until you get to the heart of each area of dissatisfaction in your life.

As you go through this process, you will identify, examine, and choose the personal goals that work for you and that are most likely to bring you professional satisfaction at this point in your career. Likewise, you will want to question and distinguish the standards of professionalism that define you as a lawyer and how they interact with the goals you select. Don’t hesitate to modify or even abandon goals you previously embraced wholeheartedly. What brought you personal and professional fulfillment earlier in your career is unlikely to remain your primary motivation throughout your life. Be willing to reinvent yourself, and recognize that you hold the keys to a balanced and satisfying practice.

If you are interested in revitalizing your practice by examining these issues, see the box listed on the previous page for the OAAP workshop in January.

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