



IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

December 2005
Issue No. 60

WOMEN LAWYERS: NAVIGATING YOUR LEGAL CAREER

Just recently, a client said to me in her counseling session, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I used to be really motivated at work. I was excited to work on big cases. I thrived on the challenge, and I liked it when people noticed how good I was. Now, I only want to work with clients I enjoy, and I don’t care about how ‘important’ the case is or who notices what I do. Maybe I’m done with the law. I just don’t have the fire anymore. Should I be looking at a different career?” This highly skilled attorney with 20 years of experience is going through a very natural change in motivational patterns in her career path. Her anxiety, however, is common and very understandable. While most of us realize that our motivations for work will likely change as we grow, these changes tend to creep up on us. They can cause considerable angst, as they appear to come from out of nowhere.

When women choose law as a career, the most common reason they give is intellectual challenge.¹ They usually embrace the career expectations instilled in them in law school and enter the field with high hopes. Yet by the end of the third and fifth years of employment, respectively, 38% and 60% of new lawyers have left their jobs.² Within 10 years, as revealed in a 2000 survey of 5,000 male and female attorneys, 48% of the women were planning a job change.³ Within 20 years, women are often wondering how they ended up where they are and why it doesn’t feel as good anymore. Evaluating and changing one’s job is a natural process as the years go by, but it is fre-

quently experienced as a vague dissatisfaction over time that cannot be explained, understood, or navigated.

Research to date consistently shows that women attorneys report overall satisfaction with their jobs, despite that their jobs are inferior to men’s on measures of income, status, level of authority, and mobility prospects.⁴ In a study of Chicago attorneys, in-depth analysis showed that despite the report of overall satisfaction, when questioned about specific aspects of their jobs, women showed a difference from men in eight out of twelve categories. In the following seven categories, they were significantly less satisfied than men: level of responsibility, recognition for their work, chances for advancement, policies of their organization, salary, and control over the amount and manner of their work. With lack of happiness in these critical areas, how is it possible that the women report overall satisfaction?

Theories to explain this “paradox of the contented female lawyer”⁴ range from lower expectations about work to higher overall life satisfaction that spills over into attitude about work. Many women feel they have more control at work than they do in their home life, and work provides an environment to develop significant adult relationships. The way that work can enhance women’s home life and community relationships may lead to overall satisfaction, despite the faults that may exist in their jobs.

Beyond intellectual challenge, a career in law also offers emotional advantages. These motivators may include several concepts – such as ambition, achievement, recognition, status, and

OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

503-226-1057
1-800-321-OAAP
www.oaap.org

Lawyers Helping Lawyers

- Alcohol & Chemical Dependency
- Career Change & Transition
- Gambling Addiction
- Mental Health
- Procrastination & Time Management

*A free, nonprofit,
confidential program
for you.*

prestige – that women are often discouraged from acknowledging or talking about. In contrast to the early socialization of most women, which includes giving primary attention to the needs of others, it can be healthy and natural to want professional advancement as well. In fact, part of the paradox of the contented female lawyer may be explained by the fact that most women are proud of being attorneys – proud of what they have accomplished and the social rank it gives them.

Despite their pride in accomplishment, however, women often feel conflicted about their professional and personal ambitions. In working with women who have suspended their legal careers to stay home with children, I often hear, “I feel like a nobody – I don’t know what to tell people I *am* anymore. I hate social gatherings because the only thing I have to talk about is what I *used* to do.” Even for women who have continuous careers in the law, there remains a stigma attached to women who are seen as “too ambitious.” Or, more accurately, women can be ambitious and socially affirmed as long as they are also attentive to the wants and needs of others. On the flip side of ambition, many women find themselves asking: Is it okay *not* to want to “rise to the top?” Does this mean that I am less of a lawyer? What does rising to the top mean?

In his insightful and controversial book *Somebodies and Nobodies*,⁵ Robert W. Fuller dares to identify rankism and talk openly about it. He acknowledges the search for status and prestige that unconsciously underlies many decisions in professional life. Unlike *achievement*, which is defined as “the act of completing a task successfully through your own efforts,” or *contribution*, which is “to play a significant part in bringing about an end or result,” rank, prestige, and status require societal agreement. Everyone in society, or at least a segment of society (law school faculty, alumni, and students, for example), must agree that certain achievements are more important than others. To sustain this value, others must be indoctrinated into the system. The reward for carrying forward the traditional values of a profession lies in the prestige, which is defined as “standing or estimation in the eyes of people; weight or credit in general opinion.”

Though they may not admit it, there are times in the life of many professional women when they want prestige, status, and higher rank in the profession. When these pursuits bring societal acknowledgment, the cost of pursuing rank is worth the effort.

However, for some women, the costs become too great, or they find that their values change as their life experience increases. The social motivation they had come to count on to drive them in their careers disappears. Sometimes a sudden negative event in the workplace (such as sexual harassment or, more commonly, sexism in the form of favoritism for male colleagues) disillusion them or jolts them into realizing that their world has changed. Sometimes values change due to personal experiences, such as entering a primary relationship or giving birth to a child. In situations such as these, values tend to shift slowly and imperceptibly. The result is a disorientation of the self-concept. Women begin looking for their old motivation, the “old self” that used to make decisions based on competition and upward mobility, prestige, and status. They are then confused when the old self is nowhere to be found.

The secret of keeping up with our changing selves is to *expect change* – to realize that career cycles of about seven to ten years are normal. Many theories of women’s psychological development postulate that a seven-year cycle of personal change is the norm. Yet as women start to outgrow their preconceived ideas of what they ought to be doing, their first response is often to judge themselves harshly. Depression, self-deprecation, and disruption in relationships are not uncommon. Obviously, these responses are detrimental to a person’s well-being. The sooner a woman can accept the change and begin the process of transition, the better off she will be.

Unfortunately, many women convince themselves and everyone else that something is wrong with them or that their current work situation is miserable. Neither is necessarily true. *It may just be time for a change*. Although change is rarely easy, it is frequently necessary to grow as a professional and as a human being. Graceful transition does not automatically mean leaving the law or your job. It may, however, mean recognizing and accepting the nature

of your new emotional, financial, and relational values and transforming your work life to keep up with the internal change.

If you are interested in learning more about issues confronting women lawyers as they navigate their careers, attend the OAAP seminar described in the box on this page.

Debora Landforce, MS

Debora Landforce is a psychotherapist with a private practice in Eugene. She specializes in working with midlife women in transition.

ENDNOTES

¹Byers, M.L., "Career Choice and Satisfaction in the Legal Profession," *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal*, 1996, Vol. 12, No.1, Chpt. 1.

²American Bar Association Annual Meeting: CLE Program, Law Practice Management Section, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" August 5, 2005.

³The NALP Foundation for Law Career Research and Education and the American Bar Association, "After the JD: First Results of a National Study of Legal Careers," 2004, Section 8, pgs. 57-60.

⁴Hull, K.E., "The Paradox of the Contented Female Lawyer," *Law and Society Review*, 1999.

⁵Fuller, R.W., *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*, New Society Publishers, Canada, 2003.