

Achievement 201: The End of Sacrifice

Beginning in law school, attorneys are taught to be self-reliant, perfectionistic, and workaholics. This can lead to achievement: success in law school, a job with a firm, and the respect of others. But it often requires a lawyer to postpone their own needs for years at a time in order to fit the mold of the lawyer identity. While the sturdy willpower to achieve may be effective early on, it will usually wear a person out over time. There is another way. By letting go of sacrifice, fueling the engine of wellbeing, and enlisting multiple supports to harness your career you can get from Achievement 101 to Achievement 201.

The first principal of achievement is learning how to postpone gratification to get what one wants. Unfortunately this idea is pushed to its limit in many forums. The high school football coach preaching “no pain no gain” to his players. The high school junior staying up all night hopped up on adderall studying for the SATs. The thing about this strategy, I call it Achievement 101, is that it works. It often produces results. Lawyers are very familiar with this method. But it is no guide for living. There is too much sacrificing of oneself. There is another way.

There is no precise moment when a transition in thinking about achievement occurs. Plenty of doctors in residence in their thirties are pushing themselves to the limit, postponing self-care, relationships, etc for this memorable achievement. Litigators become accustomed to 90 hour work weeks followed by a few weeks of downtime. It can be a dreadful roller coaster. One goes from periods of intense pressure and fear of failure (think law school) to feeling spent, dysregulated, confused, and often depressed about the seeming endlessness of this cycle.

Sometimes this transition in thinking begins in one domain before another. In relationships, for instance, one may realize that they don't have to always be showing off and seeking to impress their partner. Or they find out that they don't have to exhaust themselves being a support in certain friendships. Or they discover they don't have to placate every demand their parents make of them to achieve healthy outcomes. Yet this transition in thinking about one's work can take longer, especially among attorneys.

Achievement 201 can be similarly productive to Achievement 101, but more importantly it is both enduring and the process is gratifying. The first principle is that you can't do it alone. For work tasks it means asking for help. The saying “if you want something done right, do it yourself” may often be true, but it doesn't have legs. Seeking assistance will often take the form of the handy paralegal, co-counsel, or associate. Or it may take the form of the supportive mentor attorney, supervisor, colleague, law school classmate, section member, etc. People for whom you don't have to hold up a superior sturdiness of completeness but can be your flawed, candid, worthy self, unafraid to ask questions.

Professional support is important, but it's not complete--it really takes an army to harness a career. This can include a personal trainer, psychotherapist, barista, massage therapist, office management consultant, accountant, financial advisor, chiropractor, yoga teacher, waiter, etc. When I see my barber, I spend twenty minutes knowing that he has my back and it means a lot. I feel refueled to fight the good fight if you will.

Psychologist Philip Zimbardo, in his book *The Time Paradox*, looks at Present-Hedonism not as a selfish orientation but as a healthy element of self-care. Are you engaging activities that help you to feel vital, energetic, and capable of taking on challenges? Whether it is eating out for

lunch every so often, or shopping for the clothes that keep you feeling fresh, or maintaining a dedicated bond with your elliptical machine, there is obvious merit to knowing what it takes for you to feel like yourself, “on”, and not a spent, overworked, and confused attorney, wondering when this professional tornado will abate.

The shift is not just towards healthy activities, but really an adjustment to a different identity. From the one trick pony who sacrifices their wellbeing because they lack insight into what else they would be doing, to the multifaceted professional who is passionate about their work and knows what it takes to fuel one’s practice.

I’ve used the work “sacrifice” twice now and there is a point. If you make yourself into a pack mule all kinds of passive aggression will follow. You might compare the hours you work to that of your colleagues with great precision, proving your sacrifice and your resentment for them. You may become irritated by your clients who do not seem sufficiently appreciative of your efforts. You might resent the family you are working so hard to provide for. You might be annoyed at happy people who seem to have it easy. You may envy street sweepers whose jobs may appear simple.

Lawyers can be their own worst enemies, always expecting more of themselves. The good news is that the shift is refreshing and does not require a root canal. The keys are to know the advocates in your army and what titles they have. They probably deserve medals for their service. And to understand what activities are your sweet spot that help you to feel happy to be you. This is a necessary part of the equation as making yourself miserable will not work.