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Ways for women to stick with their legal careers

By Karina Z. DeHayes

Whether working in private law firms or the public sector, many women leave the practice of law for valid and important reasons. Many leave after starting families or because of the need to care for ailing, elderly parents. But should these events trigger a departure from the practice of law? The answer depends on the underlying reason for leaving.

If you are a woman who no longer enjoys practicing law (or perhaps never did), the decision is easy. When family obligations prove to be inconsistent with or difficult to balance with a career you never enjoyed or no longer enjoy, the decision to leave is simple and will cause you little, if any, regret.

If, however, you enjoy practicing law, but are considering leaving because you feel that you are getting “pushed out,” you should stick with it. But you must have frank communications with those in charge as to why they should stick with you.

For more seasoned female lawyers, hopefully, you have done what is necessary to earn the right to have others stick with you. For young female lawyers, keep the following tips in mind.

Earn the right to have others stick with you

Loyalty is reciprocated between decent people. Whether you are an associate in a law firm or a young lawyer working in the public sector, you cannot expect that those in charge will accommodate fluctuations in your career if you have not earned the accommodation.

How do you know if you have earned the right to have others stick with you? You know if you can answer yes to these questions:

- As a young lawyer, did I strive my best to perform excellent work for every assignment rather than “phoning it in”?
- Did I stay late at work and go the extra mile when my place of employment needed me to do so?

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• Did I stay late at work and go the extra mile when I had the choice and flexibility to do so?

• Did I offer the firm more value than my colleagues provided, such as by becoming a bar leader or writing articles to help further my own goodwill and that of my place of employment or by making connections through current relationships that could evolve into rain-making opportunities in the future?

Answering yes to these questions is a sign that you are a valued lawyer. But being such a lawyer is not enough if no one knows how valuable you are.

Seek an appropriate mentor

As you perform quality legal work and build your reputation as an excellent lawyer, you should choose a colleague as a mentor. Your choice should be someone who is in the upper echelon of your place of employment. It may be a woman or a man, but it must be someone who can guide you appropriately and who has influence in your place of employment.

We all know that relationships do not happen overnight. And the best relationships are developed through cooperative efforts in facing and overcoming difficult issues and situations. Invite the person you have chosen to lunch fairly often, preferably a few times a year. And do not be shy about informing your mentor about the various ways you add value to your place of employment.

Inform your mentor about your trajectory

As you establish a relationship with a mentor, discuss with that person issues related to your career trajectory. Note that most men who succeed as lawyers experience a career with a systematic upward trajectory. Year after year, valuable male lawyers become involved in more complex cases and do more significant work on those cases.

Most women who succeed as lawyers also work very hard and their trajectories start on a similar upward manner. They become involved in more complex cases and do increasingly significant work on such cases. But then women — more often than men — develop family concerns and obligations that impose different demands.

A woman's upward trajectory plateaus, and sometimes it dips.

Once you sense that your upward trajectory has plateaued, do not try to hide the fact. You are fooling only yourself if you think that no one has noticed. If you are not in your office as

late as you used to be, if you are not getting in as early as before or if your billable hours have dropped, you must have honest conversations about these matters with your mentor.

Otherwise, those in charge will assume that you are “just not the lawyer you used to be” and that you have “lost your firepower.” You must convince your mentor that you are still dedicated to your law practice despite the current drop in billable hours or time spent in the office and ask that person to stick with you.

Be upfront and tell your mentor these things:

- The drop in my hours is not permanent;
- Have faith in me because I have been both loyal and an excellent attorney for you for many years. I will hold up my end of the bargain once things in my life settle down; and
- Please know that although my office light is not on, I often am working at home.

People will write you off only if you let them. What happens with your career is more controllable than you might realize. So don't let them write you off and be true to the promises you make to your mentor.

Be a good lawyer even when you are on a plateau

Balancing work and family obligations typically necessitates fewer cases or projects. As a valued lawyer, have the confidence to request fewer cases or projects or fewer days in the office. There will be times when it is necessary to work from home after you put your children to bed or attend to other family obligations. Working from home will establish a trust between you and those who matter. Those in charge will know that your darkened office does not mean you do not care or are not working.

Most attorneys who want to retain qualified women will not make a habit of demanding that your work be done in the office. Avoid working with partners who make such requests a habit, as your loyalty to them may not be reciprocated.

Remember, the task of building rapport and confidence begins at an early stage of your career and it continues throughout a plateau period and when you are ramping back up. Be a likeable person and one who is perceived as competent and engaged and you will be amazed at how much support you get from your colleagues.

You will find that those in charge will stick by you, which will allow you to stick with your career — if that is your goal.