

Shaping the Future: Empowering Attorneys to Create a Career They Love

Unhappy at your job? Don't hesitate or overthink; take action now to create a career you love.

When I was a young attorney, I transitioned from litigation to corporate law because I thought it would be less contentious than litigation. Some of my clients made a strategic move to transactional law because they believed it would be more friendly to them as working moms. And many of my coaching clients moved from high-powered law firms to an in-house practice because they hoped it would provide a platform for growth without having to sacrifice their health and personal life.

And yet, on an almost daily basis, I hear from attorneys (particularly women and those who are in the early stages of their careers) that they are overwhelmed and experiencing constant feelings of anxiety and burnout.

What if it were possible to have a career in which you moved seamlessly from work to life and back to work again, all while living in integrity with who you are? What would it be like to be *fully* engaged at work, while being keenly present at home or at play, all without worrying about the “hit” your career might take? If you had this life, how would your health, work, and relationships evolve?

Unfortunately, the world does not support this vision ... yet. But the world is changing. In 2022, LeanIn.org and McKinsey & Company released their Women in the Workforce report,¹ which showed that “women leaders – already underrepresented in corporate settings – are switching jobs at the highest rate in years, significantly more than men in leadership. They’re ditching their companies for ones with more

opportunities, flexibility and commitment to inclusion.”

I don't know about you, but I didn't need this report to tell me what I've seen for decades – women² in corporate America, including law, fed up operating in an entrenched and broken system that is out of step with their lived experiences. The McKinsey report has the data to back this up.

And members of Gen Z are not tolerating it either. According to a 2023 Project Management Institute survey, “more than half of young professionals are likely to leave their jobs due to dissatisfaction with fulfillment (59%), professional development (57%), and providing value (53%).”³

So, what are we going to do about it?

The McKinsey report and other publications addressing the so-called Great Resignation include excellent roadmaps

BY JULIE BONASSO

With the accelerated flight of women from traditional corporate settings and many younger adults' refusal to participate in toxic and dysfunctional cultures, now is the time to influence real change within current organizations.



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and suggestions of what *organizations* can do to combat this problem. However, I want to focus on what *you* can do to create exactly the life you desire and deserve.

Based on my experience working in Biglaw and coaching attorneys, there are three options. First, do nothing. Second, stay and change the DNA of the organization. Or, third, leave and create a business that leverages, values, promotes, and utilizes your personal, unique strengths.

Maintain the Status Quo

For generations, women have been working in accordance with other peoples' expectations of how they should behave – and here's what we have to show for it. New data from Future Forum indicates that 46% of women are burned out compared with 37% of men,⁴ and researchers with the Mayo Clinic have found that women are

twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depression.⁵ Moreover, the leading cause of death for women is heart disease, 45% of women age 20 or over have hypertension, and 41% of women are obese.⁶ And despite making up 45% of entering-associate ranks, only 18%-31% of partners and shareholders in Biglaw are women.⁷

In addition to women, workers under 30 are also at greater risk of burning out compared to everyone else. Almost half (48%) of 18-to-29-year-olds said they feel exhausted compared with 40% of their peers age 30 and up.⁸ In a 2023 Deloitte Survey, 46% of members of Gen Z and 40% of millennials "say they feel stressed or anxious at work all or most of the time."⁹

Anecdotally, here's what I hear from my clients.

"I've lost my joy."

"My health is suffering."

"The money isn't worth it."

"I'm falling deeper into the crevices, and I can't pull myself out."

"I don't have the same level of ambition as I did early in my career, and I hate myself for it."

"I can't 'cut it' and feel like a failure."

"I'm ashamed."

"I have constant anxiety."

"I don't have time for friends or family."

If we do nothing, at best, many of us are in a state of languishing, where we aren't depressed but we're not flourishing either.¹⁰ At worst, we are killing ourselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Three Ways to Change the DNA

With the accelerated flight of women from traditional corporate settings and many younger adults' refusal to participate in toxic and dysfunctional cultures, now is the time to influence real change within current organizations.

Here are three ways to do this.

1) Practice Conscious Leadership.

Conscious leadership first involves guiding others with full awareness of self. It includes promoting innovation and change by having a deep understanding of the ecosystem and individuals within that system. It's an inclusive, focused strategy versus an ego-centered approach.

- Avoid self-judgment.
- Show courageous decision-making.
- Use intuition and logic.
- Empower your team.
- Practice active listening.¹¹

2) Advocate for Fierce Congruence.

One reason lawyers are suffering is because they've moved so far away from what's important to them. When we feel the pressure of things we *have to* do or act out of fear, our brain biology changes and stress hormones are released. The model of congruent leadership is one in which the "activities, actions, and deeds of the leader are matched by and driven by a leader's values and beliefs."¹² This type of leadership is executed with ease and less stress.

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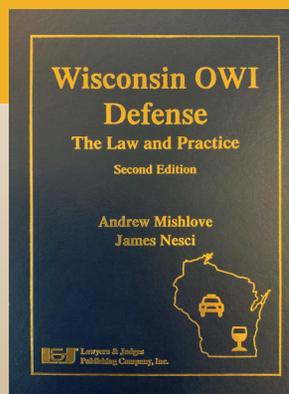
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- Don't compromise.
- Consistently act in alignment with your values.
 - Hold others to the same standards as you hold yourself.
 - Be transparent.
 - Model healthy behaviors.

3) Show Up in Love. Yep, you read that right. “The key [to] leading with love is to nurture a culture where people feel safe enough to be vulnerable.”¹³ This can be difficult in law, but “research shows that people who work in a culture where they feel free to express affection, tenderness, care, and compassion for one another were more satisfied with their jobs, committed to the organization, and accountable for their performance.”¹⁴

- Express kindness, empathy, and genuine appreciation for your colleagues and leaders.
- Build connections with those who are different from you.
- Communicate your own fears and failures.

Leave and Create a New Business

If staying at a job seems too onerous, like an uphill battle that will take generations, then leave and create a business

that's fueled by your values, without having to give up income, ambition, or family relationships.

I know this sounds scary and unrealistic, especially for the typical risk-averse attorney, and there are endless objections. But think about the price of *not* taking action.

Here's how to get started.

Create Space. Find a space free of noise, distraction, tech, clutter, kids, and so on. Sit quietly. Start with 10 minutes every day and work up to an hour or more. Do this regularly. “White space” allows you to decompress and access your higher cognitive functions, including creativity.¹⁵ During this time, ask yourself: What would be your biggest regret if this were your last day on this planet? What would you stop doing right now? How would you like your life to be different a year from now? What is one step you can take toward that goal?

Believe In the Possible. Many attorneys have created their own ways of using their degrees. Reach out to them for inspiration and ideas. Do not engage with people who tell you that you cannot do this. Hire a coach who will hold up a mirror to your soul; tell you the truth when you don't want to hear it but know

you need it; keep you accountable; and help you see, realize, and execute the possibilities of who you were put on this earth to be.

Take Fast Action. Attorneys are notorious overthinkers, especially when it comes to making radical moves. We already know the answer yet keep churning the question in our brains. Our logic prevents us from recognizing the truth and doing something about it, and instead we talk ourselves out of what we feel called to do. The antidote to that is to make a move, *right now*. DON'T THINK. And watch your power accelerate exponentially.

Conclusion

Women lawyers and young professionals are in a pivotal moment of power. What would our industry look like if we chose to change the DNA or simply left?

Let's take inspiration from our corporate counterparts and the Great Resignation and say, “no thank you” (or something stronger) to the law industry of yore.

It's time to take back what we've allowed others to control. Will you join me? **WL**

ENDNOTES

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²In this article, “woman” or “women” includes cisgender and transgender women.

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