

Shifting Gears

Smart lawyers seek new challenges to drive their careers forward. **BY LAURIE N. ROBINSON**



At a certain point in their careers, many in-house lawyers find themselves stuck in the same gear—performing similar transactions over and over again—almost like a worker on an assembly line producing widgets. ¶ To avoid this, you have to shift gears at certain points in your career to move forward. It's important to never become too comfortable in the safety of familiarity and to constantly seek challenges that will bring newness into your legal practice. As Leonardo da Vinci once said, "Iron rusts from disuse; water loses its purity from stagnation ... even so does inaction

sap the vigor of the mind."

For some, the idea of shifting gears is scary because it requires you to move outside your comfort zone. But by no means should the fear of failure or making a mistake stop you from being all you were created to be. In the words of Babe Ruth: "Never let the fear of striking out get in your way."

The best way to overcome your apprehension is by shifting one gear at a time—building upon each new experience and letting the little successes turn into big successes. Over time, accumulated victories will give you the confidence to move into new realms that you never imagined you could achieve.

New gears to shift into include the following:

Taking on New Responsibilities (Gears 1 & 2): One way to break the monotony and stagnation that can beset your career is to develop new skill sets and qualifications. Training, continuous education and professional development are great ways to increase your knowledge and build skills that can translate into job opportunities and new responsibilities. It is also important to learn how to use technology, participate in professional organizations, go to conferences

and read industry publications.

The days of our parents who followed just one job course built on seniority with clear steps for professional advancement are long gone. It is up to you to take steps to help steer your career in a variety of ways that keep you challenged and on fire. That requires you to hone your current skills and embrace and seek out new job responsibilities that will open up new doors.

Learning New Practice Areas and Becoming Multifunctional (Gears 3 & 4): To shift from second gear into third or fourth gear requires that you learn new practice areas within the law and become multifunctional within your organization. If you expect to move up, you cannot do only one thing well and wait for recognition in that role. Movement constantly takes place in an organization, and supervisors come and go. As a result, you have to impress new people with your skill sets and qualifications. And by becoming competent in more than one practice area, you will become a greater asset to those supervisors, your company and the clients you serve.

Taking Steps Outside the Workplace to Become More Polished (Gears 5 & 6): Because we spend most of our time inside

the office interpreting legal language and statutes, we don't have many chances to interact with people. As a result, we don't have as many opportunities to develop ourselves into more polished products.

You can remedy this by participating in professional and community organizations and speaking at conferences. This will help you build relationships, network professionally and socially, partner on joint ventures and assume leadership roles. It also will lead to speaking engagements. It's amazing how intimidating it is to speak into a microphone before an audience. But by speaking at conferences, you not only will meet new people, but you will learn how to modulate the volume and tone of your voice, which can be a great career asset.

Once you shift into the fifth or sixth gear, you will become a more confident career driver and will be able to journey into charted and uncharted territories. And it is never too late to start shifting those gears. ■

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