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Knowing how to change course

Here is a portion of the conversation. To learn more about this topic, see the video available at chicagolawyer.com.

How can you change your career or practice in this economy?

Tina Martini: You can always change your career or practice area, but to be successful, it often requires a great deal of thought, planning, perseverance, patience and risk tolerance. First, you need to gain some clarity as to the type of career or practice into which you want to transition — simply knowing you want a change is not enough and can actually lead to a premature decision on your part. This type of transition needs to be handled strategically so that you ultimately make the right decision and do not jeopardize your existing job in the process. The real key is to do your homework. This includes talking to others who are in the field in which you are interested. These can be people you know or individuals to whom folks in your network can connect you to.

You should map out why you are interested in this practice and consider the potential risks, rewards and different courses of action available to you. You need to consider whether your current employer is a viable option in helping you to reach your goal. For example, will you be allowed to transfer to another department and what are the potential issues with doing so? Based on all of this information, as well as your intuition, you will ultimately figure out which avenue is the right one for you.

David Susler: Changing careers or practices can be a challenge in any economy but it is possible. I did it 12 years into my career when I found my first in-house position through networking. Another way to do it is to go back

to school and study a particular discipline. Maybe get an MBA, LL.M. or a certificate in a particular business field or substantive practice area. Any of those may help ease the transition to a new practice as they help demonstrate a certain level of knowledge about the new area as well as your good faith.

How do you specifically network successfully to help your career?

Martini: I think all of us view networking as an effective vehicle for improving our careers. However, you first need to figure out your short- and long-term goals and plans, how much time you have for networking and how your current contacts or those whom you want to meet through your network can help you accomplish your objectives.

You should then strategize as to when and how you are going to connect with those individuals. You should periodically examine how successful your efforts are in this regard and figure out what works well and what can be improved. Remember that networking is a two-way street. Just as you are seeking help from others, you must also be willing to assist people along the way. Often, the individuals you help today are the ones who assist you tomorrow. It is not a quid pro quo. Rather, it is an organic process, which gradually unfolds over time and one for which you need to be willing to give more than you receive.

Susler: Building your career, getting clients, getting a job, keeping your job, whether in private practice or in-house, is almost always about building relationships. You must focus on what you can do for others and you must network all the time, not just when looking for clients or a job. It takes time, often years, before you see “payback” in terms of landing billable work or a new job, but those are not the only goals. A strong network enhances

both your professional and personal lives, leads to new opportunities and enables you to make a difference for others. If you do that, it will come back to you.

If you want to move up at your firm or company, what should you do?

Martini: You first need to be clear on what moving up means at your organization, what different positions would be available if you did so and whether it is something you actually want for your career. If it is, you need to assess the roles, responsibilities and requirements for promotion and you need to compare your skill set against this list to determine whether there is a good match or if you need to do some work in certain areas first. You should also consult with your mentors and trusted advisers, both within and outside the organization, who can be a good resource in helping you determine whether your hopes and expectations are realistic and in developing a strategy for accomplishing your goals. Ultimately, you need to make sure you are willing to put in the necessary hard work and you must also be patient and flexible, since promotion opportunities sometimes take a while to come to fruition.

Susler: I would add that you should be the best you can be at your job. Demonstrate that you are both a leader and a team player. Take initiative and follow through. Gain the trust of others in your organization, including those ahead of you, your direct peers and those following you, so that they will support your advancement.

Again, make it about others. We are lawyers and we are in a service profession, so serve your clients and your co-workers well. You will get the notice you need to move up. ■

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