

Tips for Deciding if You Want to Be a Partner

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As a young associate, you probably find yourself wondering: do I really want to be a partner at a law firm? Here are some universally applicable tips to help you answer that question, no matter the size, scope, or focus of your firm.



Think Very Long Term

There is a recent TED talk—[3 ways to plan for the \(very\) long term](#)—that deserves credit for this tip. What is the “very long term”? Conceptualize it this way—think about your unborn grandkids. What legacy would you like to leave them? How do you want to be remembered? If they could learn one thing from you in your career as a lawyer, what would it be?

That’s the challenge—to think beyond the next deposition on your schedule, the next trial on your calendar, the next deal you are closing, or the next client meeting you are attending. Constraining yourself to a mindset dominated by near-term action items robs you of the meaningful opportunities to get back to your very long-term purpose. Thinking in the very long term helps you deal with the existential uncertainties of the short term. A very long-term mindset will also help you make strategic decisions to move your career forward. And, through those decisions, the answer to whether you want to be a partner at a law firm will become more clear.

Identify and Evaluate an Unmet Need

While every law firm is understandably unique, each one has a need that, if met, will help the firm grow, such as revenue, philanthropic/community outreach, business development, client retention, technical development, and personnel management and optimization. These are all needs associated with the valuable human capital of a law firm.

Revenue is another way of referencing a lawyer's billable or collections requirement. The other needs are less obvious. Larger firms often have a philanthropic need such that there may be a path to partnership if you are an accomplished fundraiser. Likewise, every law firm needs new business. There often is a path to partner if you are someone who excels in cultivating profitable, new business relationships. Others may excel in client retention, which is a way to describe the lawyer who is consistently timely, responsible, and thoughtful in her client communication. Technical competence is also valued at many firms. These firms have a need to stay current on the use of emerging technologies and legal trends. You may be the lawyer with unique savvy handling technology, or you may be the lawyer who excels in research, writing, and analyzing emerging legal trends. If so, that may be your path to partner. Personnel management and optimization also presents a path-to-partner opportunity. Simply put, a law firm's people are its greatest asset. If you are a lawyer who can consistently motivate and incentivize your firm's people, meeting this need may chart your path to partner.

To meet any of these needs, you must self-evaluate your contributions candidly and determine whether those contributions are filling an unmet need. If so, be willing to have a conversation with the partner for whom you work directly to discuss *your* vision of *your* future.

Can You Find Balance?

Michael Allen, CEO at Mainspring Legal, once said that, "[y]our time as an associate is usually less than 25 percent of your total career." His theory was that, if you "burn yourself out just getting to [partner], you can't run on empty for 30+ years to retirement." He is right.

Challenge yourself to find a true outlet and emphasize outlets that involve your family. The human condition values connection and fulfillment. Firm life often provides little connectivity and uncertain fulfillment. Outlets, and especially those outlets that involve your family, can satisfy the desire for connectivity and fulfillment. Finding balance and prioritizing balance helps you maintain a sustainable "slow jog" pace, which is the necessary pace to finish the marathon race to partner.

Do You Believe That a Rising Tide Will Lift All Boats?

This is important because it speaks to the mutuality of the buy-in proposition. From a young lawyer's perspective, the buy-in proposition references the unconditional willingness to do grunt work because the young lawyer believes that the law firm has his or her long-term interests in mind. From the law firm's perspective, the buy-in proposition is reflected by the compensation

structure and the allocation of resources toward a young lawyer's professional development. A young lawyer should feel like he or she is at a place where there is mutuality in the buy-in.

Are Mistakes Valued?

The value assigned to mistakes highlights a firm's culture and the room for your professional development within that culture. Most lawyers would agree that mistakes vary in significance. Some mistakes are out-of-bounds. Many of those mistakes are outlined in the Rules of Professional Conduct. Other, less-significant mistakes are teaching moments.

If a young lawyer believes that mistakes of any significance are not tolerated, that lawyer may become paralyzed by the quest for perfection. This paralysis manifests through indecision. Every lawyer's job, young or old, is to counsel and advocate. Indecision undermines your capacity to do your job.

Ask yourself if you are at a place where you are "free to be me," because in that freedom you will become a better attorney. In becoming a better attorney, you may find yourself empowered and invested on your path to partner. Empowerment and investment are sustaining stimuli that fuel your journey on the path to partner.

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