

# WHAT MAKES LAWYERS HAPPY

by Libby Coreno, Esq.

Earlier this year, I congratulated a recent law school graduate on her admission day at the Appellate Division. She smiled, lowered her voice, looked concerned, and said, "I am excited, but I looked through the packet I was given, and it's full of helplines for depression, addiction, and suicide. Is there something I wasn't told?"

Her question immediately bought to mind the recent work of Lawrence S. Krieger, Esq. and Kennon M. Sheldon, "What Makes Lawyers Happy? Transcending the Anecdotes with Data from 6200 Lawyers," which will be published this year by the *George Washington University Law Review*. The authors provide statistical data that supports their conclusion that the extrinsic value system taught in law school, and extended into the legal profession, has an inverse relationship with the level of lawyer happiness. "[T]he psychological factors seen to erode during law school are the very factors most important for the well-being of lawyers," Krieger and Sheldon write. So my answer to my newest colleague was, "Yes. There may be some things you weren't told."

Krieger and Sheldon's work now quantifies what we have intuitively suspected for quite some time: Law schools and the legal profession have the potential to break down attorneys' intrinsic value system in favor of placing predominant value on external

rewards (money, power, prestige) that have a demonstrable negative correlation with well-being. The result, according to Krieger and Sheldon, is higher rates of dissatisfaction with the profession and of depression and alcohol use among certain segments of our populations. Notably, the higher the income and billable hour requirement, the higher the rates of alcohol use.

Conversely, public service attorneys generally enjoy higher rates of well-being (second only to judges) and lower rates of alcohol use. The good news from their findings is that placing emphasis on psychological values, including authenticity, autonomy, competence, community, and self-understanding, can positively affect attorney well-being. In fact, the authors claim that focusing

on these intrinsic values can increase productivity, employee retention, and an overall positive image of the profession itself.

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In my work with attorneys, especially women attorneys, I have long focused on the importance of developing and listening to one's internal compass which provides moorings in the oftentimes choppy seas of law practice life. I encourage attorneys to ask themselves, "What are the intrinsic values unique to me? How can I rely on those values to make decisions in alignment with my own integrity and authenticity?" My invitation to each and every attorney is to begin a path of deep reflection on your personal values and then on finding ways of living and working congruently with those values. This path requires courage, a healthy relationship with consequences, understanding, self-compassion, and, most of all, patience. Recently, one of my mentoring clients had to engage in the difficult process of evaluating a job change from the private sector to the corporate world. She asked, "What if the reason I'm leaving private practice is because I just can't hack it anymore?" My questions to her were: What if "hacking" it isn't bringing you joy anymore? What if joy was an acceptable criterion for evaluating what you value? Is it possible to let go of others' extrinsic values in order to find well-being for you?

Attorneys have the power to create value systems within themselves and within their workplaces that emphasize the discovery of personal purpose, greater collaboration and autonomy—and, as Krieger and Sheldon point out, perhaps become more productive and profitable in the process. ∞

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*Libby is also the founder of The Silent Partner, a consulting and mentoring firm for lawyers and professionals seeking to learn ways to live, practice, and make transitions mindfully, authentically and creatively. A health crisis in 2008 brought Libby to several prominent spiritual teachers, which blossomed into her own study of Buddhist psychology and mindfulness that has been a cornerstone of her life ever since. She works one-on-one with clients, as well as in facilitating changes in group dynamics within law firms and not-for-profit organizations.*