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### CORRECTION

In "Dealmakers of the Year" [April], the law firm name Simpson Thacher & Bartlett was misspelled, and the article misstated the value of Canadian Pacific Railroad Limited's hostile offer for Norfolk Southern Corp. as \$30 million instead of \$30 billion. We regret the errors.

By Caren Ulrich Stacy and Lisa Kirby

# Career Hacks From the Top

*A study of more than 400 high performers reveals some unexpected strategies for getting ahead.*



*In the legal profession, the rules of the game* for achieving success are often unwritten. The top performers—those who manage to do work that they love and attain status as leaders in their field—have hacked their way to the peak without a map.

In an ongoing, multiyear study, Diversity Lab’s team of talent experts, psychologists and data scientists has conducted and analyzed individual interviews with more than 400 leaders from 25 Am Law 200 law firms and legal departments across the country. (Diversity Lab, creator of the OnRamp Fellowship to facilitate the re-entry of experienced women lawyers into the legal profession, helps develop diversity initiatives for law firms, legal departments and banks.)

Known as Diversity Lab’s “Bright Spot Study” in social science, these structured interviews focus on the skills, habits and behaviors of those who made it to the top and their strategies for success. Participants were chosen on the basis of high evaluations from senior lawyers, positive client and business partner feedback, internal and external leadership roles, and long tenure at the firm or legal department.

Essentially, these are the lawyers whom the organization’s leadership would clone if given the opportunity. The following four commonalities unexpectedly stood out as critical to these high-performing leaders’ road to success.

## THE JERRY MAGUIRE EFFECT

Rather than trying for perfection, many high performers have leveraged their unique strengths to succeed.

These lawyers watched who made it to the top of the food chain and then, instead of simply mimicking those power players’ strengths, they figured out how to supplement their weaknesses. The film “Jerry Maguire” coined the phrase, “You complete me.” That’s what high performers do to find their own power track: They jump in to provide an important attribute (or two) that the power player whom they work for—or want to work for—is lacking.

For instance, a midlevel high performer recalled that her supervisor (also a woman) was terrific on overall busi-

ness and legal strategy but terrible about remembering specific details related to the case. Having juggled the hectic schedules of three teenagers, the midlevel lawyer was a master at details. As a result, her supervisor brought her to every client meeting and routinely gave her the floor when details of the case were being discussed. Soon, as the supervisor got busy with other clients, she became the client’s go-to expert in charge of that case as well as other matters.

Almost every lawyer interviewed as part of the Bright Spot Study talked about finding their own authentic advancement/growth path based on what they believed they brought to the table that others didn’t. And many of them say they eventually got promoted because of it.

Once they were promoted, these high-performing lawyers saw the benefit of the “you complete me” strategy in building their own teams, identifying team members who could fill a void or gap in their own skill sets.

## A LEARNING MINDSET

Successful lawyers don’t always luck into relationships with the “best” mentors and sponsors. Many recounted experiences in which their more senior counterparts did something they didn’t agree with or they thought was out of line. But rather than discounting the experience and moving on, the high performers opted to learn from it.

They reported learning as much about being a leader and how to advance from the bad mentors and sponsors as they did the good ones. This learning mindset is a key element in high-performers’ success and their overall view of the world—learn from everyone around you, whether you agree with them (and like them) or not.

As an example, a woman associate spoke of watching oral arguments led by her supervisor, a male partner, who also served as her formal mentor at the firm. The partner

was extremely argumentative with the judge, who then ruled against their client in what the associate called a “burst of anger.” Of course, the ruling may not have gone in their favor regardless, but the partner appeared unwilling or incapable of adapting his style as the judge visibly grew angrier.

The associate sat quietly, knowing that, given the situation, her role as observer and her supervisor’s seniority, it would be inappropriate for her to speak up. However, she thought to herself, “This is not how I’ll do it when it’s my turn at the podium.”

Of mentors, she says now, “You don’t have to like them, but you can still learn a lot from them.”

#### QUIET BOUNDARY SETTING

Over the past few years, law firms and legal departments have made huge leaps in creating and implementing gender-neutral policies and agile working options that provide greater opportunities for both women and men to better integrate work and home. Most high-performing lawyers do, in fact, work flexibly, but most choose not to officially participate in their organizations’ flex-time programs. Instead, they ask for forgiveness rather than permission when it comes to their daily schedules.

With families, hobbies and other demands on their time that are as important to them as work, most high performers leave the office when they want to and then log back on to do work from wherever and at whatever time, day or night, works best for them and their clients. If one of these high performer’s kids has a recital at school, for instance, the lawyer may choose to work from home that day, telling the select few people who need to know, but without broadcasting it to the world.

Similarly, high performers who live in high-traffic commuter communities don’t typically follow the masses on work arrival and departure times: They go earlier or later than everyone else. They get high-quality work done efficiently and on time, so no one pays much attention to the details of where and when they do it. The trust relationships they have created with colleagues



and clients afford them the latitude to flex at will and manage work and home demands on their own terms.

High performers, it seems, have mastered “quiet boundary setting” to allow them to integrate their personal and professional lives.

#### EFFICIENCIES AND “SHORTCUTS” TO MAXIMIZE PRIORITIES

Just as high performers do not attempt to be all things to all people in their legal work, they also do not attempt to personally perform each task needed to keep their lives functioning effectively.

Some said they rely on a significant other to share equally in managing home or family responsibilities. Most high performers, though, whether or not they had significant others and kids, said they outsource almost everything that detracts from what they deem as personal and professional quality time. Essentially, they do the things that make them happy and ask for help on the rest.

In addition to outsourcing low-valued tasks at home, high performers think strategically about how they structure their work (and commute time, as described above) to maximize personal time. Most high performers interviewed as part of the study eat lunch at their desks to gain an extra hour of work while at the office, so they can

get home earlier. They also respond to emails late at night and before sunrise so they can make the most of the daylight hours before and after work with their loved ones and for themselves.

High performers are incredibly efficient with their time, schedules and duties so they can “be present at home” when they are at home. They are acutely aware that there are only 24 hours in a day, and that time must be maximized to successfully (and sanely) manage both work and personal activities.

The high performers who employed these strategies to support their professional success and personal happiness share a common philosophy: They did not passively allow their careers and life experiences to unfold. They made strategic, proactive decisions based on their skills and values instead of being swept forward by the advancement of time and accumulation of experience. They controlled their own destiny by filling voids with their strengths, setting quiet boundaries to integrate home with work, learning from superb and not-so-great role models, and creating efficiencies achieve their priorities.

*Caren Ulrich Stacy is founder and CEO of Diversity Lab, where Lisa Kirby is director of research and knowledge sharing.*