



Alison Monahan: Welcome to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're talking with Whittney Beard, an ex-lawyer and career coach at Orrick, about how to really own and direct your career, even as a young lawyer.

Your Law School Toolbox host today is Alison Monahan, and typically I'm here with Lee Burgess. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience, so that you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be. We're the co-creators of the [Law School Toolbox](#), the [Bar Exam Toolbox](#), and the career-related website, [Career Dicta](#). I also run [The Girl's Guide to Law School](#). If you enjoy the show, please leave a review or rating on your favorite listening app, and if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can always reach us via the [contact form](#) on LawSchoolToolbox.com, and we would love to hear from you. With that, let's get started.

Welcome back. Today, we're talking with Whittney Beard, an ex-lawyer and career coach at Orrick, about how to really own and direct your career, even if you're just a young lawyer. So, Whittney, welcome.

Whittney Beard: Thanks, hi.

Alison Monahan: Thanks so much for joining us. Can you give us a little bit of your background, so that our listeners understand more about where you're coming from?

Whittney Beard: Sure. As you mentioned, I'm a former practicing attorney. I'm about 18 years out of law school, which is shocking to me.

Alison Monahan: I know, it seems like yesterday, right?

Whittney Beard: Right, exactly. So, I practiced law for about seven years. I practiced as a corporate finance attorney at a large law firm in Los Angeles at the beginning of my career. I also clerked for a district court judge for a year, before I did that. And then, at the tail end of my career, I actually had a law school teaching fellowship at a local law school here in San Diego, and kind of dipped my toe in the water of academia, and quickly decided that it was not the life for me, for various reasons. Although, it was really fun to work with law students.

And then, so, having decided that I was pretty much done with all the different parts of my legal career, I decided to get trained as a life coach, which is a pretty big 180, but it-

Alison Monahan: Yeah, for sure.

Whittney Beard: Yeah, but it really seemed to fit my personality. I was always kind of the person at the firm or in the office who was talking with other people about their lives



and their careers, and what they really wanted, and so it felt like a really natural fit for me. And I've been doing that for about 11 years now.

For the past eight years, almost eight years, I've been exclusively working at Orrick, with their lawyers, as the career coach in-house. So-

Alison Monahan: What does that mean, exactly? Like, what do you do for them?

Whittney Beard: So, pretty much, I'm a confidential career coaching resource to any U.S. lawyer who wants to work with me at the firm, and that really runs the gamut from summer associates to first-year associates, all the way up through our partners. I'd say the sweet spot of my clientele at the firm is usually mid-levels to senior associates, and then junior partners, that's where we kind of start to really dig in on, you know, business development.

And it starts to get a little bit more intense at that point in your career, and we start really looking at how are you managing teams, how are you relating to other people, how are you managing stress in your life and at work, and then also, how are you staying focused on your professional development as well as your business development goals.

So, that's kind of the meat and potatoes, so to speak, of what I do with our lawyers, but because I'm an in-house resource, I'm also someone at the firm who can just pretty much talk to anyone in a confidential setting about any question they have around all of our policies, whether it's flexible working or our caregiver leave policies, for associates who are deciding to have a family.

And it's kind of a really neat thing that we offer, because you can go and have a conversation about all of your questions and all of your thoughts about what your career might look like, without really sharing it with anyone until you're ready, and until you've had a chance to sort of game it out, or bounce the ideas off of someone else, and really figure out how it might end up working.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's really interesting. I was talking to someone recently on the podcast who is a legal recruiter now, but she was saying, in the process -- she was at a firm, obviously, before she did that -- she was like, "Oh yeah, I just talked to everyone at the firm about how I was thinking about leaving," and I was like, "Huh, did that seem like a good idea?"

Whittney Beard: Yeah. I guess so, yeah.

Alison Monahan: And she was like, "Well, maybe in retrospect, maybe I shouldn't have been talking about, you know, to my boss about how I wanted to leave, possibly." But it sounds like you are the person she could have gone to talk to, basically, and



been like, "I don't think this is working for me, necessarily, or not in the way that I want it to be. What do I change, or what do I do next?"

Whittney Beard: Yeah. You know, it occurs to me pretty frequently that, had I had someone like me when I was practicing in a large law firm, I think things might have gone a little bit differently for me. I don't think I would have ended up a partner at a large law firm. I'm sure that was really never going to be what was my ultimate objective.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Whittney Beard: But, I think I probably would have stayed a little while longer, a good year or two longer, at least. And in the minds of a large law firm, those are critical years. They're very profitable years.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's a lot of money for them.

Whittney Beard: Yeah, and I think I also ... You know, I would have suffered a little bit less. I mean, there were lots of things I loved about being a lawyer at a big law firm: I did exciting work, I worked with great people. I still see that, obviously, at my firm. I see the opportunities there.

But there was also a lot of, just angst and also not really knowing how to manage all the different balls that were in the air, and how to manage the different personalities. I sort of internalized a lot, and dealt with it all myself. Having someone to go and just talk with, and kind of blow off some steam or even just get some tips on how to better manage my time, or better manage the personalities that I worked with, I think would have really saved me a lot of grief, and it would have made me more effective. And like I said, it would have had me last longer at the firm.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it's interesting, 'cause I think a lot of lawyers go into therapy so they can go and talk about their career.

Whittney Beard: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, there's a lawyer-trained therapist I know who's kind of like, "Well, usually we end up talking about the firm, you know, and their career path." Yeah, I mean, I think there is, these are kind of strange places to work, and I think there's a lot of pressure from a lot of different directions.

What, in your experience, do you think new or kind of newish lawyers, maybe up to that sort of junior partner level, what are they doing right and wrong, as



they start their careers? Like, what mistakes are they making repeatedly, and what are the people who are happier doing differently?

Whittney Beard: I think that's such a great question. I think that the trend that I really see, particularly for very junior lawyers, and it changes over the course of the career.

Alison Monahan: Sure.

Whittney Beard: I think for very new lawyers, like first, second, third years, kind of coming into the firm, the folks who I see who are happiest and thriving, they're very well networked in the firm. They have great relationships. And that doesn't mean they have a lot of relationships, necessarily, but it means that the people that they do work with, whether it's other associates, whether it's staff, or partners, they definitely have a few solid relationships. So, they've created connection and sort of that human touch at the firm, that's one thing.

I think a mistake that I see a lot of juniors make is they ... You know, we're all very, we went to law school for a reason, we kind of have a personality type, to some degree.

Alison Monahan: Sure.

Whittney Beard: And so, we tended to be successful, we've been successful in our educational lives, and we've probably been pretty heavily at the helm of every single choice, right? Like, "I'm going to take this class, and then I'm going to take this class." You know, "And I'm going to get this internship, and that summer associate position." And I think you kind of have to, like, take your hands off the wheel a little bit when you first get started at a law firm, at the very, very early stage.

I find that if you're really focused on every experience ... So, like, if you're six months into your law firm and you still haven't gotten a particular experience that you feel like you need to have-

Alison Monahan: It's like, "I haven't taken a deposition." It's like, you're a first-year, calm down.

Whittney Beard: And yeah, like, "When am I going to?" And it's like, "Well, it's going to ..." So, I'm a big proponent of being, you know, asking and being intentional about what it is that you seek. I'm a coach, right, so I'm all about people being clear about where they want to end up, and how they're going to get there.

But there is some level in those first couple of years, of just like, let the experiences roll in. Let it occur. And see what you like, see who you like, see where your career kind of takes you. Don't get too focused on directing it, 'cause that will stress you out. And you really ... I mean, the facts kind of are,



you don't really have a lot of control at that stage. You don't really have a lot of expertise, you really are a blank slate in a lot of ways. So, you're going to get a lot of very general assignments as a result.

So I think that's a big, that's a big issue that I see. When I see people come in, and they're very, very focused on particular experiences, or a very specific type of work, I find that that can be very stressful for them.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's-

Whittney Beard: And then, the other thing ... Oh, sorry.

Alison Monahan: No, I was just saying, that's a very interesting point. And I think, from my experience in a firm, I think a lot of the most valuable experiences I had were really not, like, first-chairing a deposition, but maybe somebody brought me along as the second chair, to help them. You know, I wasn't actually talking, obviously, the first couple that I went to. I mean, they're not just going to throw you in, and be like, "All right, go defend this deposition."

But once you've sat through a couple of them, and been the person handing over the papers, and you probably did a lot of the prep, and you did a lot of the questions, and things like that, then people start to feel more comfortable with you. Gee, you can't just go in and demand, "I should be defending this deposition." It's like, "Oh, okay, what do you know? Nothing."

Whittney Beard: Right. Yeah, and that's true, and I do think ... What's really cool about, you know, there's always the endless talk about Millennials, and the sort of ... There's lots of negativity, I think, around what Millennials expect. And I think the cliché or the caricature of the Millennial is kind of what you just mentioned, like, "Oh, give me this opportunity even though I've not proven that I can do it."

Alison Monahan: "That I'm like, remotely competent, or trained."

Whittney Beard: Yeah, and I mean, I think that's a big part of it too, is, like, this is a really ... This is a tough profession. And, talk about clichés, we've all heard the sort of like 10,000 hour rule that Malcolm Gladwell wrote about in one of his fabulous books. And it's like, you know, 10,000 hours, not just 10,000 billable hours on any random thing, but 10,000 focused hours of practice makes you a master.

And, that's a lot of hours, and we're doing a lot of different things, as junior lawyers, so we're sort of scattershot. And so, if you just imagine, your job is to just really take in the experiences and understand that ... And this kind of folds into my last point about what can kind of derail or keep a person happy as a junior, is: you spend a lot of time as not an expert.



Alison Monahan: Right.

Whittney Beard: And we're used to being at the top of our class, and we spend a lot of time-

Alison Monahan: It's painful, it's very painful.

Whittney Beard: Yeah, it's painful. And you know, sometimes the best way to learn something is to royally screw it up. And that's often how you do learn at a law firm. And so, it takes a little bit of, like, you kind of have to put your ego to the side, and also expect that you will screw up.

I mean, don't make silly mistakes. Do what you can, like, if you know you're prone to grammar mistakes or spelling mistakes, then focus on that, work on that, get someone to support you to make sure you don't make those mistakes. 'Cause you don't want to make the silly mistakes. You want to make the mistake like, "Ooh, I didn't know that filing was due, and now someone caught it, and we're going to file it, and it's at the deadline, and, whew, I really missed that bullet."

But, like ... So much of the learning is through making mistakes.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think there's a difference between ... I remember once getting yelled at 'cause I misspelled someone's name in a letter. And that's legitimate, that's a screw-up, you don't do that. But in another-

Whittney Beard: Yeah. But you never did it again, right?

Alison Monahan: No, I never did it again, and you know, at the time, I was like, "Yeah, you're absolutely right. I completely own this, this was a complete screw-up, I totally get your point. You probably don't trust me for anything else for a while, I understand that. It won't happen again."

Whittney Beard: Right.

Alison Monahan: But then, yeah ... Then there are other things. I mean, for example, the first time, probably the only time, actually, that I ended up actually taking a deposition, is the partner was going to do it, and then we had this settlement conference that kind of blew up, and then the client was having a fit. And like basically, they were like, "You do it."

And I'm like, "I don't know how to do this." And they were like, "Well, you have a six-hour flight to the East Coast, so I'm pretty sure someone has a book. Just read the book." And I was like, "What? You can't do this. This is not how ..." I mean, it was like a tiny, tiny, little piece of, it was a joint defense thing, where



you had six actually very experienced attorneys doing most of the deposition, and then I come in and ask a few questions.

And one of the partners reads it afterwards, he's like, "You did a terrible job." I'm like, "What did you expect?" Like, come on. "I did the best I could, I didn't know what I was doing. No one helped me, I had no training." He was like, "Well, I mean, this is just not ..." I was like, "Oh my god, are you ..."

So, but that's the kind of thing, where you're like, okay, you're not going to be perfect.

Whittney Beard: Yeah. And you know, it's funny, and that's the other thing ... A lot of what I do is, like I said, working with people in just working with other personalities. And being at a law firm can be a very intense experience at times, it can be a really great experience, it can be the best training of your life, but it can be pretty intense. And to remember that everyone's human, like even partners are still learning, and they're all just being human. And I'm not always my best. I know, it's not like a first date every day, with me.

Alison Monahan: Sometimes you're like, "Oh, I haven't washed my hair for like three days."

Whittney Beard: Exactly. So, I always try to keep people tethered to that, like, "Hey, we're all just human being doing our best." Sometimes it feels really bad, but if you can keep that in mind, it helps.

And then, the last thing I'll say about being successful, again as a junior lawyer, and really, I'm sure a lot of this kind of carries through, but. There's, it's interesting, because again, I'm a coach, right. I'm all about people having balanced, healthy, thriving lives. I think that's really important.

But there's also something to being a young lawyer and also having lots and lots of experiences which sometimes can mean like lots and lots of work.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Whittney Beard: There's something about how that creates a learning curve that works. And this ties into the mistakes thing. Like, so much of our training early on is sort of trial by fire, we're just learning through just doing the work, and making mistakes, and fixing our mistakes, and taking feedback along the way. And what I'll notice is, it's sort of like, if you're not that busy, or if you're really focused on keeping your schedule kind of very, very, you know, operating within a certain boundary -- like, let's say 9:00 to 5:00.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, good luck.



Whittney Beard: You know, if you're really focused on that, sometimes what happens is, you just don't get the opportunity to move through mistakes. And the analogy I use is like mountain biking, or skiing, or anything where you're like in motion, and you can come across like a bump in the road.

If you're going too slow on a bike, or if you're going too slow on skis, and you come to something that gets you a little squirrely, on the bike or the skis, and you're going too slow, you'll fall. Like, you just fall right over. But if you're moving fast enough, you blow right through it.

And I see the same thing, particularly with junior lawyers. If your workflow isn't coming kind of smoothly and fluidly, and you get to a point where you hit a bump in the road, it's like then it gets really magnified, and it feels really much bigger than it actually is, if there's not something that, "Well, okay, whatever, we're just going to move right through, and move on to the next thing." You kind of persevere on it, and you think about it too much.

So, there's really something to being open to taking on a little more than you think you can handle, and being willing to kind of, just juggle and keep yourself in motion. Does that make sense?

Alison Monahan: No, it does make sense. I was thinking of an experience I had when I was an associate, where basically we got called in to kind of join a case that was going to trial. And I mean, it was going to trial in like a matter of weeks. One of those situations where, you know, I get the call where it's like, "All right, this is the situation. It's going to be totally crazy. Do you want to do it or not?"

And I was like, "Oh, sure." And they're like, "No, you need to think about this. Like, this is what ... You need to understand what you're getting into. We're going to fly to the East Coast, we're going to live there, we're going to trial. It's going to be crazy. It's going to be a great learning experience, but like, you're going to be working 20 hours a day for the next month. Like, are you in, or are you out?"

Whittney Beard: Right, yeah.

Alison Monahan: And I was like, "All right, I'll do it." And you know, it was totally crazy, and people were screwing things up left and right, but yeah, it was the same thing. It was just like, by an hour later, no one even remembered. It was like, "All right, we can't worry about that anymore. That's done."

Whittney Beard: Right.

Alison Monahan: Like, "We have to be prepared for tomorrow."



Whittney Beard: Yeah. My advice is like, take that opportunity. If you can, you know, there are times in your life when you can't, and there are times in your life when absolutely those opportunities aren't going to work for you. But when you can, take them, because those are the types of experiences that can really catapult you to the next level of your development.

Alison Monahan: Sure, and I think it's a great opportunity to get those people to bond with you who are potentially, not just mentors, but really sponsors. You know, those people who are going to go to bat for you when the time comes and you're up for partner, and they're like, "Hey, I went to trial with this person, they're amazing. We should definitely do whatever we need to keep them." Like, you've got to kind of go through the trenches to have those sort of relationships.

Whittney Beard: Yeah, yeah.

Alison Monahan: Well, let's talk specifically about a different aspect of big law. 'Cause I worked in several places, and sometimes it's kind of easy to feel like a cog in the machine. I mean, it sounds great, like, "Oh, take these opportunities, blah blah blah," but sometimes it really feels like you're just sort of at the mercy of other people who are telling you what to do, particularly I think in the early years.

I mean, do you think this has to be the case? And what can associates do to really start carving their own path, if they have preferences?

Whittney Beard: Yeah, I mean, I think ... You know, it's funny. So, one thing ... I don't know how to explain this, so I'll try. But, there is ... Here's ... As a coach, a lot of my work ...

One person who was training me to be a coach once said to me, "All there is in coaching is your client and their relationship to the world. That's all there ever is to coach, is your client, and their relationship to whatever is in front of them. Whether that's their weight, their relationships, their work, all of it is just them and how they relate to what's happening around them." And I loved how simple that was, 'cause I was like, "Cool, that's like, easy job, right, that's all I have to work on." But it actually is very complicated.

And so, there's something about what you said where it's like, "It's easy to feel like a cog in a wheel, and it's easy to feel like you're at the mercy of this sort of system." And as a coach, what I would point to there is, it's like, we all have stories. We all have sort of like ... We all have ideas about how the world works.

And so, if you walk into a law firm and you trend towards, or you kind of let yourself get mired into that narrative that says, "You're just a cog, you're just a..."



- Alison Monahan: Right, "You have no control, like whatever."
- Whittney Beard: Yeah, no control, all of it. It's like, well, that's going to be pretty demoralizing.
- Alison Monahan: Right.
- Whittney Beard: And I mean, I'm not here to tell you to be Pollyanna, or to pretend that something is something that it's not, but also as a coach, I would challenge you to pay attention to the narrative that you've got, and actually challenge yourself to shift it. So it's like, "Well, what are you getting out of this? Like, what are you getting out of this experience, and are you here for it, or ... Do you choose it, or would you rather choose something else? And if you choose it, well then choose it, and then make it as effective and valuable as you can, so long as you choose it." Does that make sense?
- Alison Monahan: It does, and I think that's something that we talk to people a lot, who are struggling in law school, is like, "Look, you don't have to be here. You're making a choice every day to show up and be a law student. That's the choice you're making. Nobody is holding a gun to your head and making you go to class. Like, maybe your parents are putting pressure on you or whatever, but it's still your choice."
- Whittney Beard: Yeah.
- Alison Monahan: And you know, I don't want to be nutso about it, but it's like, "Choose your choice, basically like, if you're going to do this, do it." And I think, you know, my experience at least in various firms, was you've got to understand the system, but once you understand who has the power and who's pulling the levers, and who ... and then you understand people's motivations, you can start to work within that system, and really impact who you're working with and the kind of work you're doing.
- I mean, obviously, you can't just show up and demand, "I'm not doing this." It's like, okay, it doesn't work like that. But if you can find a partner who you'd prefer to work for, and make yourself indispensable, that person's going to be like, "Oh, I need you." And then you get off all of the other crap, basically.
- Whittney Beard: Yeah. And you know, and I've found ... So, the way that I navigated that system was -- this probably says bad things about me, I don't know -- but I was never terribly interested in the particulars of the work. Like, I liked the work a lot, I really did. I loved the area that I worked in, and I was like, if I was doing a transaction of some kind or another that involved companies and money, I was like, "This is fun."



Alison Monahan: As I'm like, "Oh, god, what a nightmare."

Whittney Beard: Right. So, like, that ... I liked that, I liked it, and I enjoyed it. But what I really cared about was people. I just wanted to work with a particular partner, I wanted to work with particular associates. I did my best to get them to want to work with me.

Alison Monahan: Right, exactly.

Whittney Beard: And that's how I approach it, and if you're people-oriented, if you're into the relationship aspect of it, consider that that's your job: find the people you like, and get on their teams. And say, "I want to do what you're doing, I don't really care what it is." That's one way to navigate the system and start to kind of carve your career.

And I think, again, had I stayed at my firm and continued down that path, I would have been successful, even though I wasn't ... I don't know, maybe my not caring so much about what I was doing would have impacted me at some point. But, like, I mean-

Alison Monahan: Well, I mean-

Whittney Beard: It would have gotten me somewhere, and it probably would have been fine.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, exactly. I mean, I think, particularly in the early years, how do you possibly know what kind of work you're good at, or what you even want to work on?

Whittney Beard: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: I was a patent litigator, and I'd never taken a single IP class in law school, but I was a programmer before I went to law school, which turned out to be pretty useful.

Whittney Beard: Right, yeah.

Alison Monahan: Like, oh, okay, yeah. You can understand code, and talk to engineers. Done, we don't need you to have taken an IP class.

Whittney Beard: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, so I think sometimes people, even starting in law school, they have this idea like, "Oh, I have to take all these classes and do all this," but the reality is just like, you show up, and they're like, "Well, this is the big case." I mean, when



I was a summer, I had asked to do, I don't know, like international arbitration or something, which later I found out was just contracts, and I hate contracts.

But I remember walking in to the assigning partner, and they were like, "Okay, well, it looks like you wanted to do some international work, so we kind of have an international case for you." I was like, "Okay." They're like, "What do you know about federal Indian law?" And I was like, "What?"

Whittney Beard: International, I love it.

Alison Monahan: And they're like, "Well, it's kind of international, our client is an Indian tribe, what do you know about this?" I was like, "Nothing. No one would know anything about this, as a 2L, come on."

Whittney Beard: Right, right.

Alison Monahan: But it turned out to be really fascinating, and I actually took a class in it my third year, and was like, "Wow, this is really cool." But I mean, I could never have predicted that.

Whittney Beard: Yeah, no, and that's true. We had a great program, I think, on Indian law, at UCLA. I remember there was a lot of people-

Alison Monahan: It's a fascinating topic.

Whittney Beard: It is fascinating. I've done ... Anyway. I've done some adoptions and stuff, and there's a whole layer of the adoption law that ...

Alison Monahan: Yep, definitely.

Whittney Beard: Anyway. But yeah, I mean ... And on the flip side, if you know what you're interested in, like if you know that you're interested in industry, or you're interested in a type of case, or a type of litigation, or a type of transaction, then talk to people about that, and know who in the firm does it. And, again, get connected to them, find a way to make them feel like, "I want you on my team."

I don't know if I'm answering your question, I want to make sure that I do.

Alison Monahan: I kind of forgot what it was, but I think we're good.

Whittney Beard: I know, me too.



Alison Monahan: Well, I guess, actually, I think the one thing I did want to follow up on is, sometimes people -- and I think you addressed this, earlier -- they get really obsessed, whether it's the person, or sometimes even firms do this.

They kind of have like a checklist of skills you should be developing each year, and experiences you should be having. I mean, how much do you think people need to worry about kind of checking the stuff off? I mean, I see a downside in not paying any attention to it, but also a downside in getting too obsessed with it.

Whittney Beard: Right. It's interesting, 'cause we also provide those. We call them benchmarks, and we provide them to our associates. And I always tell people, when I show them the benchmarks, and we talk about it, I say, "This is not a checklist, and we don't want you to think of it as a checklist." I mean, I think those are great guides, and I'm really grateful that firms are starting to do that, 'cause again, when I was practicing, it was sort of like, "Go dive into the deep end of that pool, and start swimming, and you'll figure it out eventually."

Alison Monahan: Right.

Whittney Beard: And having that as a roadmap? I think it can be really great as a roadmap. Like, if you're at the end of your second or third year, and you're looking at the list, and you're not seeing yourself in that list, or you're not relating-

Alison Monahan: Right, you've done nothing on it.

Whittney Beard: Yeah. You know, then it's probably time to have some conversations about rounding out your experience, to the extent that that makes sense in your practice. And I'll say one thing here about ... Sometimes, what doesn't seem like it's going to get you very far, like, "Oh, I'm just doing doc review," or, "I'm just doing diligence," sometimes those are the best experiences.

One of the best experiences I had as a junior associate was a diligence project for a deal that we did. And I, you know, at first it felt very daunting, and it also was, I was kind of like, again, with the story, "Oh, here I go doing that sort of nightmare first-year, sit in a room with 20,000 boxes." And it ended up, I mean, I understood everything about the company that was being sold. I understood everything about how it worked, how it operated, who managed it, who owned it.

It was like, "Ohhh," like all those things I did in law school that were sort of loosely floating around in my head started to come together, and I really felt like it pushed me forward in my career. It just got me to understand things in a



holistic way, that I hadn't before. And it started out as like, "Oh, this is that sort of nightmare scenario."

So sometimes ... This doesn't exactly answer your question, but sometimes those broad, general, big projects can really push you forward. And they -- to answer your question -- they can hit a lot of those sort of check marks that you don't expect them to hit.

But again, I don't think that it's terribly useful to think of any sort of broad description of the experiences you should have as a checklist, because the nature of your practice is going to be unique to you, and the nature of the expertise you develop is going to be unique to you. And if you feel like, because you haven't gotten a certain type of experience, or a certain type of matter that somehow you are lacking, then you're going to drive yourself crazy. I mean, it's just, there's too much.

Alison Monahan: There are too many people to compare yourselves to.

Whittney Beard: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think the point you made about kind of being that junior person, doing the due diligence, and really knowing everything? I think that's a really key role that people sometimes undervalue as junior associates. It's like, you are the one who's closest to everything. You're the one who has read the deposition transcripts, or who's reviewed the documents.

And the reality is, the people above you don't really have the time or energy to put towards that. And so the more that you can be that resource, of like, "Oh, yeah, I know exactly where that piece of information is," or, "I have this at the tip of my tongue, I can answer this factual question," that's incredibly valuable.

Whittney Beard: Yeah, and I also think ... So, transitioning from, like, junior to mid-level, I think something that doesn't always translate and occur to people is -- and to the extent that you can do it earlier on, the better -- but you spend so much of your time in your early part of your career being the person who knows everything, and kind of, anyone can call on you at any time, and be like, "Where's that thing? What was this about? When's this on the calendar?" And being able to answer the questions, that you don't necessarily get good at saying, "Hey, by the way, this thing's coming up on the calendar."

Or, "Oh, by the way, we just figured this thing out, we need to think about it." Because you're so used to being the person who's sought out, and then you answer, as opposed to being the one who keeps the team abreast of everything and then putting in value. And there's a transition that happens where I see



people kind of trip up, between that junior to mid-level stage, where they forget that it's their job to start thinking broadly, and to start being more of a manager for the partner, and more of a proactive part of the team.

I don't think there's a downside to trying to be proactive earlier on, it's just harder to do, 'cause you don't know as much, and you don't know what to be proactive about.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Whittney Beard: But, once you start to get the lay of the land, you've got to, partners really expect and want you to start being the person who volunteers to think strategically, and volunteers to keep the team on pace. When they don't see that, that's when they start to kind of doubt you, or feel like maybe you're not understanding what your role is shifting into.

And it's one of those things, it's like, it's sort of just expected. It's not always spoken, it's often unspoken, and that's where I see it can be a trip to people, or a place to trip over for people, because you're waiting to be told what you should be good at next, and no one's going to tell you that.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think that's a great point. I mean, the people that I saw being most successful as they moved up did take on increasing amounts of responsibility, and did really become that person who's almost, who's comfortable managing pieces of the project, and managing the people below them, and figuring out, "Okay, this is what we've got to get filed by this date, how are we going to do that?"

I mean, if you can take that off of the plate of someone above you and they trust you? That's huge. I mean, I had a partner once tell me, "Look, your job is to make my life easier, and make me look better." And I was like, "Okay, I get that."

Whittney Beard: Right, right.

Alison Monahan: "That doesn't seem to have anything to do with what I'm actually supposed to be doing, but now that I know that, this all makes a lot more sense."

Whittney Beard: Yeah. And it's ... And I do think that's true. If you do view yourself as like, "I'm here to make that person look good. I'm here to make the client think we are amazing, and by making that partner look good, that's what I'm doing." I think that that's a great mission to keep in the back of your mind. I mean, not in like a weird, "I'm not important" way, but like, "Part of the way that I'd be important



is I make sure that this firm shines, and that that partner shines." And hopefully, you're working for someone who you like, and you want to make them shine.

And that's something that, when I'm coaching partners, or when I'm coaching senior associates, or speaking to lawyers on this podcast who may be senior associates or partners someday, it's like: be a great leader. Be a great mentor to people. Be the person that people want to bend over backwards to help. If you make people feel important, if you talk them up and you give them credit, and you tell them that you care about their career and their lives, and you actually ask them questions about those things, they will do anything for you. I mean, they will make you look good.

And so, as we practice as lawyers, there's the whole side of getting the experience you need, and learning, and getting your training actually practicing law. But then, there's so much of it that's just like, play well on a team. Be good to people. Make people want to be around you. And that doesn't mean you have to be an extrovert, or funny, or anything. It's just, be authentically who you are, and care about people, and that should help you quite a bit.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think, I mean, I would imagine as you move up like to be the junior partner, your goal there is, "How do you get people to be loyal to you?" Because, basically, this is an ecosystem where people are trying to work with lots of other people, you need people to want to work with you, right? You need your people.

Whittney Beard: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: All right, well, we are running short on time. Let me just run through a couple of different scenarios, and get your thoughts on these.

Whittney Beard: Okay.

Alison Monahan: All right, so: I am about to start as an associate at a large law firm when I graduate in a few months, but I just got an email telling me the practice group I was planning to work in was phased out. I still have an offer, but should I go?

Whittney Beard: This is a highly personal decision. I think one thing I would say is, variations of this can happen all the time, and maybe it's the practice group gets phased out, or the practice group you want is full and they're going to put you in a different one. I think the first thing is, it's tough.

These are decisions that get made, like decisions to hire people obviously get made 12-18 months before they're going to join, so sometimes the business of the law firm and what you want, they don't jive, and it's unfortunate. So,



hopefully, your firm is very, very aware of that, and willing to work with you on that.

I'd say you probably chose the firm you chose because of the people, I'm assuming, and you chose it because there are things about the firm that you really, really appreciate. In the rare circumstance where you chose the firm for this particular practice, and this fundamentally changes the way you thought your career was going to look, and you can find an opportunity elsewhere?

Alison Monahan: Right, and you have other choices.

Whittney Beard: Yeah, right. So, in this perfect world, then maybe you do, you go elsewhere. But I think for most people, what's going to make the most sense is that they go ahead and they go to this firm where they had already decided to go, and they kind of see what happens. Like, let yourself be surprised.

To the extent that you can talk to firm and say, you know, "Are there going to be any opportunities to move in this direction? Are the partners who used to be in this practice group still here, but they're doing something a little bit different?" There's all kinds of scenarios here, but just, I would say, go try to get as close to the experience that you thought you were going to have.

And again, go back to that thing I kind of said earlier, which is: seek to have a broad base of experiences as a junior lawyer. Try to get as many as you can that feel like they're in the field that you want to be in, obviously, and after one or two years of practice in honestly any area, you're going to be better positioned to probably lateral to somewhere that's a little bit more focused on what you want to do anyway, so you're probably better off going, and just kind of rolling with it.

Alison Monahan: Given your lack of other options, typically, too.

Whittney Beard: Yeah, I mean, I don't want to be ... Yeah. It just feels like you're in a bit of a lurch in that situation, and you just do what you do, you know?

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I think your advice to just kind of roll with it is probably about your only option.

All right, so: I've been in a firm for a few years, and things were going great, loved the people I worked with. But a few months ago I got put on a deal with a nightmare partner. It's really impacting me. What can I do?

Whittney Beard: So, you know, I think we've kind of touched on this a little bit in our conversation already, that sometimes there are very, very big personalities in



law firms. And working in any law firm, whether it's large or small, you're going to come across people who manage stress in different ways.

Alison Monahan: That's a polite way of putting it.

Whittney Beard: Right? And like I said, partners are humans, too, we're all just doing our best being human. And some are not the greatest humans. There are certainly ... So, there's a couple different types of partner that I would talk about here.

One would be the partner that kind of everyone knows, like, "Oh, stay away from that one, that's a really difficult partner," like always, all the time. And hopefully your firm, I know we do our best to not have those types of partners, but, you know, a few get through.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Whittney Beard: And then there's the other kind of partner, where it's like, for the most part they're fine, but then you go to trial and it's like, something-

Alison Monahan: They're crazy.

Whittney Beard: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, right. And that happens too, and again, that's just like, people under stress, right?

Alison Monahan: Right.

Whittney Beard: So, I think in the nightmare scenario where you're dealing with a short period of time in a highly particular set of circumstances, and it's like, you've just got to get through this trial, I would say ... And even with the other person who's just very, very hard to work with, my coaching is kind of like, "Deal with your reaction to the person, to the extent that you can."

And so, I'll use an example around this. So, I once worked with an associate who was in a trial situation where they were, it was a very short stint, very, very high pressure in the moment, everybody was at trial, trying to get through, and win, obviously. And the partner was extremely difficult. And the associate came to me one day and was like, "I don't think I can do this. I'm just about to lose it. I can't, I don't want to get yelled at, I don't want ... I feel like I'm stupid." You know, all the stuff that you feel when these things happen.

Alison Monahan: Right.

Whittney Beard: And I was like, "So, who does this person remind you of?" Like I got all coach-y. And the associate was like, "Oh, you know, I think it's kind of like my dad." And



we had this whole conversation about this person's dad, and it was like, "This just makes me feel like I'm eight years old again." And what we got to in that conversation was like, "Oh, so when the partner does this thing, it's not even like I'm reacting to the partner. I'm reacting to my eight-year-old self feeling crappy."

And so, it was kind of fun, you know, to go there, and obviously that feels very therapy-like and so, I don't mean to suggest that you should go and have therapy about it. But, what you can ... Everyone who has a difficult personality, all they show us is ... They're just kind of a mirror for us. Like, "Ooh, that's a personality I don't like, because it shows me something about either myself, like either who I think I am, or who I don't want to be."

When I come across someone who's very, very, let's say arrogant, I get really, really pissed off. I'm like, "Ooh, they're so arrogant," and I'm so angry about somebody else's arrogance. Other people don't get mad about people's arrogance, but I do. And it's probably because it shows me something. It's like, I learned early on that arrogance is like the worst thing that you could be, and you should be nice and not arrogant.

And so it's like I have this whole family story and this whole motto that I live by, that you're not supposed to be arrogant. So when someone's arrogant in front of me, it really triggers me, and I don't like the person. I feel really, like, stopped, and I can't have a conversation with them. And it's all about me. It's got nothing to do with them, it's all about me.

And so, I don't know if this is a very good answer, I feel like it's kind of getting a little far afield.

Alison Monahan: No, I think it's good. I mean, I'm thinking back to some crazy people, doing crazy things at trial that I've worked with, and, but also, I think sometimes people are, obviously people are triggered for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes people are just being completely crazy jerks, and the reality is sometimes you just have to stand up and be like, "You know what? This is not acceptable, and I'm not dealing with this."

Whittney Beard: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: I mean, I literally had conversations at trial and other places where I was like, "You can fire me if you want to right now, but I'm not doing this." And people actually respect that, in a lot of ways.

Whittney Beard: You know, it does happen that sometimes what a person needs from you is you to step up. And so, maybe what's happening in the stressful moment is like



they're really willing for you to be like, "Hey. You know what, okay, I got it. I get that you're upset, I'm going to fix it, but you've got to stop."

Alison Monahan: Or sometimes people, I mean, they're playing out their own family, childhood dramas, where it's like, "I just want someone to take care of me, even if that means telling me we're not going to do this." You know? It's like ... I mean, I honestly think, I think going to therapy was like the best thing ever, in law school, for dealing with all these personalities.

'Cause you do, you know, everybody has their own things. And all, like, under pressure and under stress, which people are going to be under at a firm, all this crazy stuff comes out. And the more you can just realize, "Oh, this person just wants me to tell them everything's going to be okay, and then they're going to calm down, even though they're getting paid three times what I'm making." You know?

Whittney Beard: Yeah, right. Yeah, and that-

Alison Monahan: It's just like, "All right, we're in this together, we're going to fix this problem, don't you worry, we're going to take care of it." You know?

Whittney Beard: Right. And I think that's really ... And it's true. I really do think, if you can figure out ... I love this statement, it's something I'll say as a coach sometimes is: a complaint is an unmet request. And so, it's like, when someone's complaining, if you listen for the request or the need, then you might actually be able to handle it.

So, a lot of times complaining is just like yammer, yammer, yammer, complain, complain, complain. But there's no ask, there's no, like, "And here's what would fix it." It's just like, "I just want to complain." And so, if as a listener you give up that they're ever going to ask you for something, 'cause they're not. But you just listen for the need or the unmet request inside of the complaint, then you can actually respond to the request. You can be like, "Oh, I hear what you're saying, and here's what I think you need. How does that work?"

So, that can certainly be a strategy. And I think, in general, working with someone who's just very, very difficult kind of all the time, again, it's going to take you noticing what it is that they do that really gets you, and actually working on that stuff, whether it's with a coach, or a therapist. Being like, "So I notice when they yell at me, or when they," hopefully they don't yell at you-

Alison Monahan: "When they throw the stapler."



Whittney Beard: Exactly. Like, "I'm not quick enough for that, so I've got to work on my baseball skills." But no, I think that if you can get yourself from having a reaction, that will take you 50% of the way. Just not reacting to other people doing their thing will get you so far. And then, you know, there is a place for, like you said, figuring out what is it that this difficult person really needs, and how can you provide that so that you don't get into these situations.

And then finally, what I would say is, if you do feel like you're working for someone who is just not kind to you, or not respectful of you as a human being, or god forbid, actually harassing you in some way or another, then you should ask for someone at your firm who's in HR to have a conversation with you. Ask for a confidential conversation with an HR manager just to say, "These are the problems I'm having, and I need help." 'Cause no one should have to deal with someone who's just completely disrespectful to them, or unkind. Again, we all have situations, and we're not always our best, but like, if someone's just generally not being decent-

Alison Monahan: Right, a decent human being.

Whittney Beard: Yeah, then you should say something about that. And I would find either, like, the person who is me, or your firm might have an ombudsperson who's sometimes a very senior partner, who's not very involved in the daily practice, who can talk to you. Or like an HR person, who should be willing to hear your grievances confidentially, and then help you decide what's next.

Alison Monahan: Well, on that point, last scenario: so, I'm a mid-level associate. I've been dealing with all the things we're talking about, and I just can't keep doing this anymore. I'm not really sure what I want to do next, but I know I want a better work-life balance, I want to feel like my work matters, I want to work with people I like, but I still have quite a bit of student loan debt, I can't just quit and go sit on the beach. So, how can I start to figure out my next steps?

Whittney Beard: Well, so, I think that ... I think you should always keep your network up to date. It's never too soon to start making sure that you are well-networked with your law school classmates, and with the people who you graduate law school from, and also the people you went to college with, and all of that.

I think having a great network always comes in handy, because when it comes time to start thinking about what's next for you, you can kind of put the feelers out there, start talking to people. Like, "Hey, what do you do? What does your spouse do? What do your friends do? What do you like about what you do? What do you think I'd be good at?"



So maybe start asking people, that's how I figured out I was going to be a coach. I went and I started talking to people I used to work with at the law firm, and they were like, "You were always talking to people about their lives. You should be a coach." And I was like, "What the hell is that?" I didn't even know what it was, but other people told me I should do it. And then I looked into it, and I was like, "Oh, yeah, I think they're right."

So, ask the people in your lives, keep your network up, keep it solid. I think, you know, it's always smart to have a resume, and keep it up to date. I know it's an easy thing to kind of let languish, but every six months or so, refresh it with the stuff that you've been working on and the expertise you've gained.

Talk to ... When headhunters call you, be polite, and tell them that, you know-

Alison Monahan: Yeah, they might be able to help you someday.

Whittney Beard: Yeah, exactly. Don't hang up on them, just be polite. Take their calls, and say, "I'm not interested right now, but I may be someday, and I'd like only in-house opportunities," or, you know, just be really clear with them, and let them know that they should call you when certain things come up.

And I also think, you know, we're really trying to get better at this at our firm, and sincerely, we're trying to find ways to make this work better. But your firm may actually have ways to help you figure out what's next for you.

Alison Monahan: True.

Whittney Beard: You know, we want ... We're training you guys, you're our colleagues, and we hope that someday you'll be our clients, if not our partners. And so, your firm or, at the very least, some of the people you work with, or some of the people who work at the firm who maybe you don't work with, may have ways for you to find opportunities to get placed with clients. And so, if you can, find somebody to talk to about that, or if your firm has a job board -- we're launching a job board next month, which is pretty exciting.

Alison Monahan: Oh, cool.

Whittney Beard: Yeah, to try to find and funnel people towards great opportunities at our clients. That may be something you could do. And yeah, I think those are my broad tips.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think-

Whittney Beard: And then I think, just generally knowing yourself. Obviously if you want to make a total career transition, like I did, for instance, maybe talking to, like you said,



talking to a therapist, talking to a coach, talking to just sort of a professional headhunter kind of person might also be useful.

Alison Monahan: All right. Well, before we wrap up, Whittney, can you share your best advice for young lawyers who are starting out in their careers?

Whittney Beard: I think my best advice for young lawyers is, like I think I said earlier, just kind of allow the journey to unfold a little bit. Don't get too mired down in what you think it's supposed to look like. I think ... I heard someone speaking about this recently, he called it the illusion of permanence, that we all sort of have this illusion of permanence, where we think what's happening right now will happen forever, or what we choose right now will impact us forever. And outside of really, pretty much, having a child?

Alison Monahan: Right.

Whittney Beard: That's really, I mean, not even marriage anymore, right. Not much is permanent. And what you're doing right now may or may not look like what you're doing two to five years from now.

Alison Monahan: And you have no idea.

Whittney Beard: You really don't.

Alison Monahan: I mean, if somebody asked me five years ago, "What's your five-year plan?" I could not in 8,000 years have come up with what I'm doing now.

Whittney Beard: Exactly. And there's something about that, there's something about the sort of, I don't know, like the magic of that, right, to just allow room for ... Allow room for life to just kind of happen, and the magic to happen. There ... If you have too tight a grip on stuff, you will miss out on opportunities.

And so, I really think, like, you should have a sense. Right, I'm a coach, so you should have a sense of where you want to go. You should have goals, and you should certainly be striving to create results. But don't get too fixated on how it's supposed to look. Just really allow the stuff to unfold and push you around a little bit, and get experiences.

See what you like, go for more of that. See what you don't like, move away from that. And then I think you'll have a much more enjoyable career, and you'll probably end up pretty successful without a whole lot of stress and angst about trying to drive it and really, really keep a tight grip on it.



Alison Monahan: I think that's a great point. I've often thought of it kind of like a pool game, like you take your best shot, you see where the balls are, you take a step back, you take your next shot. You know, you can't predict in advance, obviously, how the game's going to turn out. All you can really do is play the balls on the table, and do your best, and then see what happens.

Whittney Beard: Yeah. That's great.

Alison Monahan: I don't know, that's my career goal, just, you know, take your best shot.

All right, well Whittney, thank you so much. We really appreciate you coming on the podcast and sharing your expertise.

Whittney Beard: Thank you so much for inviting me, this has been fun.

Alison Monahan: Oh, our pleasure.

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