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# The Left Turn That Changes Everything: Rethinking Mistakes and Setbacks in the Legal Profession

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Lawyers are trained to get it right.

From the first year of law school, the profession rewards the ability to spot risk, anticipate problems, and avoid mistakes. Precision matters. Judgment matters. The stakes are often high. In legal practice, that mindset is essential.

But applied to a career, the same instinct can distort how we interpret our own path, convincing us there is a single right decision at every turn that must be identified and executed perfectly. Careers rarely work that way. They unfold through a series of decisions made with incomplete information, changing circumstances, and evolving priorities. And sometimes the moments that initially feel like mistakes or setbacks lead us to the very experiences that redirect us toward people, environments, and opportunities far better aligned with who we are.

## When a Misplaced Comma Felt Like the End of the World

Early in my legal career, I worked in an environment where perfectionism was not just encouraged, it was expected. Long stretches without sleep were common, and every document was scrutinized down to the last comma. Even small errors could feel like serious failures.

Looking back, I sometimes wish I could sit down with that younger version of myself and say:

*Do your best. Pay attention to the details. But don't let the fear of imperfection consume you. A misplaced comma will not make or break your career.*

At the time, of course, that perspective was nowhere in reach.

As my career progressed, I encountered moments that felt far more significant than a typo: decisions that didn't unfold as expected, professional disappointments, and experiences that initially felt like real failures. Some of those moments lingered for years. I replayed them, questioned my judgment, and wondered what I could have done differently. The emotional residue (regret, frustration, even shame) made me second-guess future decisions.

The irony is that the effort to avoid mistakes can create its own kind of risk. When the fear of getting it wrong becomes the loudest voice in the room:

- Opportunities are analyzed but not pursued;
- Decisions are delayed in search of greater certainty; and
- Professional risks are avoided for fear of repeating a past mistake.

Over time, the very instinct that helps lawyers manage risk in their work becomes an obstacle in navigating their careers. And the deeper cost, beneath the cautiousness and second-guessing, is the slow erosion of trust in one's own judgment.

## **The Mistake / Setback Trap**

There's a pattern I often see in coaching high-achieving lawyers, and it's worth naming directly.

When something doesn't go the way we wanted, we tend to call it a "mistake." Sometimes that's accurate: a decision we made that didn't land. But often what we label a mistake is actually a setback: an organizational change, a layoff, a client loss, a partnership decision, a market shift. Something that happened to us, not because of us.

Here's the trap: high achievers tend to collapse the two. *If something happened to me, it must be because of something I did or didn't do.* The layoff becomes proof I wasn't good enough. The lost client becomes evidence I should have anticipated a problem. The partner bypass becomes a verdict on my worth. Even recovery time becomes a referendum — *I should have bounced back faster.*

The result is that lawyers punish themselves for both the things they did and the things that happened to them. Self-trust takes a hit either way.

The reframe I'm about to offer applies to both. Whether the turn was something you chose or something forced on you, the way you interpret it afterward is what shapes what comes next.

To be clear, the point of the reframe is not to deny that structural realities exist. They do. People encounter racism, sexism, and otherwise toxic personalities and environments, all of which are really tough and painful to navigate. Layoffs happen because of org changes that have nothing to do with the people affected. Promotions go sideways because of firm economics, sponsor departures, shifting criteria. None of that is in question, and none of it can be changed after the fact. What we can change is the story we tell ourselves about what it means, about us, about our judgment, about what we should do next. That story is where the lasting disempowerment lives, long past the event itself. The reframe is not about taking blame. It's the opposite. It's recognizing that the event isn't the verdict on you that your inner critic wants to make it.

## **Left Turns and the Choice Inside Them**

I think of these moments as **left turns**.

A left turn is what happens when something doesn't unfold according to plan and the path changes. Sometimes you make the turn deliberately. Sometimes the turn is made for you. Either way, what follows is a series of choices, even when they feel like choiceless choices. How you interpret what happened. What you carry forward. What you decide to do next.

In hindsight, these moments often turn out to be the very ones that shaped the professional you ultimately became.

## **Questioning the Assumption Beneath "Failure"**

Lawyers are trained to question assumptions in contracts, negotiations, and legal arguments. The same skill applies to how we interpret our own careers.

At its core, what we often call a mistake simply means something turned out differently than expected. *Pause and re-read that sentence.* When you reframe "mistakes" as "outcomes I didn't want or expect," it opens the door to a different inquiry, one that changes both how we feel about the outcome and how we navigate what comes next.

## The Left Turn Reframe

When a career moment feels like a mistake or failure, a simple shift in perspective can transform how we interpret the experience. I think of it as the **Left Turn Reframe**, and it has three steps.

### 1. Question the Assumption

A negative outcome does not automatically mean a poor decision.

Ask yourself:

- What information did I have at the time?
- What was within my control?
- What factors were outside my control?

One of my clients took a senior role she had reservations about. The compensation was strong and the timing made sense for her family, so she said yes despite the hesitation. Once inside, the role didn't match what she'd hoped it would be. The internal loop ran for months: *Did I make the wrong call? Should I have known better?* It took her a long time to see that the discomfort wasn't evidence of a poor decision. The decision had been the right one with the information she had at the time. What she'd been carrying as personal failure was, on closer examination, the gap between expectation and reality, a gap that almost any decision made under uncertainty produces.

### 2. Separate Identity from Outcome

One of the most damaging internal narratives lawyers adopt is: *"I failed."*

That statement turns an outcome into a verdict on personal competence and worth.

A more accurate framing is often simpler: *"Something didn't unfold the way I expected."*

Another client was repeatedly told, in one chapter of her career, that she was "too much." Too forceful. Too direct. Too intense. Each piece of feedback landed as evidence of something she needed to fix. The internal narrative: *I'm not cut out for this.* In a later role, in a very different environment, the same qualities are exactly what make her effective. The reframe she eventually arrived at: *The feedback was never really about who I am. It was about how one particular setting responded to who I am.* Same lawyer. Same qualities. Different conclusion about what those qualities meant. The work of separating the two is what allowed her to stop trying to shrink and to find the environment where her natural way of operating was an asset rather than a liability.

When outcomes are interpreted as evidence of personal inadequacy, confidence erodes. When they are treated as information, they become part of the learning process that strengthens judgment, and self-trust.

### **3. Extract the Insight**

Every unexpected turn contains useful information. And often more than information.

Ask yourself:

- What did this experience teach me?
- What instincts became sharper as a result?
- What did I gain that I wouldn't have had this outcome not happened: not just learnings, but also people, experiences, and opportunities that have felt positive?

I worked with a client who had been laid off during a particularly difficult period in her life. Initially, the experience felt like a blow to her confidence. As we examined the broader context, she realized she had been working in an environment that had not been right for her for some time, while also navigating significant personal circumstances. The transition gave her the time and space she had not been able to give herself, and ultimately allowed her to move into a role that fit her far better.

What she extracted wasn't just an insight about herself. It was a clearer sense of the environment she had tolerated for too long, a sharper instinct for evaluating fit before accepting a role, and, in the new role, colleagues and a manager who became genuinely important to her career. None of that would have come about had the original plan unfolded perfectly.

What initially felt like a professional failure became a turning point. Not because everything magically worked out, but because she let the experience teach her something, and noticed what it gave her, rather than letting it indict her.

## **The Hidden Gains We Often Overlook**

There's a piece of this that conventional wisdom misses. Most reframing advice stops at one question: *what did you learn?* The implication is that the value of a difficult moment is purely educational. But in my coaching work, I see something deeper and more concrete: what initially feels like a failure often redirects us toward people, experiences, and opportunities we would never have encountered otherwise.

When clients revisit these moments intentionally, they're often surprised by what they gained. Not just personal growth, but tangible shifts: new professional relationships that became pivotal in their careers; exposure to work that was more engaging or meaningful; teams or leaders who valued their strengths more fully; better balance in their work and life; opportunities that would never have appeared had the original plan unfolded perfectly.

I sometimes ask clients a question that surfaces this clearly: *if you could go back in time and undo the turn, take the original path you'd planned for, would you?* Almost no one says yes. Even for experiences that took years to recover from, the answer is usually no. The people, the work, and the version of themselves that came after the turn aren't things they would trade.

For example, one client shared that she had a really hard experience early in her career. But she wouldn't change it for the world, because not only did she learn a great deal, she met someone who pointed her towards a specialty that became the cornerstone of her career. Had she not been there, she wouldn't have met him, and wouldn't have found the work she does now.

In other words, what looked like a mistake at the time was sometimes a signal that something was **not aligned**. The disruption created the conditions for something better to emerge. Not just a lesson, but a life that looks different in ways you wouldn't trade.

That said, not every left turn leads somewhere obviously better. Sometimes a turn just is. The reframe is valuable either way, because it preserves the one thing that matters most for what comes next, your trust in your own judgment.

## Rebuilding Self-Trust

When something significant goes wrong, there are usually two layers of emotion. The first is the pain of the event itself: anger, disappointment, sadness, the fear of letting others down. The second layer emerges afterward: regret, guilt, shame about how the situation unfolded, fear of getting it wrong in the future.

If those emotions remain unresolved, they shape future decisions. Lawyers become more cautious, more hesitant, less willing to take professional risks. Not because they've consciously decided to play smaller, but because the unresolved weight is doing the deciding for them.

Reframing the moment helps release that weight. When the experience is interpreted as part of a larger learning process rather than evidence of personal failure, self-trust begins to rebuild. And self-trust is what lets you make the next decision cleanly, without the ghost of the last one in the room.

## **The Left Turns That Matter Most**

When lawyers reflect on their careers years later, the experiences that stand out are rarely the ones that went precisely according to plan. More often, it's the unexpected turn (the role that didn't work out, the opportunity that seemed risky, the moment that forced a reassessment) that ultimately changed everything.

Careers are not built by avoiding every wrong turn. They are built by learning how to navigate unexpected outcomes and rebuilding self-trust each time something doesn't go according to plan.

So the next time you catch yourself replaying a moment as a mistake, try the three questions: *What was actually in my control? What does this say about the outcome rather than about me? What did I gain (not just learnings, but people, experiences, and opportunities that came into my life) that wouldn't have come if this had unfolded as planned?*

The answers may not change what happened. But they will change your narrative of the experience and how that experience lives within you, as well as how you navigate new choices.

Anjali Garg, Esq., PCC, principal of [Your Coach To Soar](#), is an ICF certified executive coach, speaker, and leadership and wellbeing trainer who specializes in helping high-achieving professionals make seemingly impossible strategic moves that yield big dividends. Her particular expertise is guiding clients to move confidently through inflection points—such as career transitions and expanded leadership roles—by blending strategy, emotional intelligence, and mindset to fuel growth without burnout. Her clients range from senior attorneys (GCs, partners, senior associates/in-house), tech and finance executives, to global corporations, national law firms, and professional associations. She is a former c-suite lawyer, with 24 years of experience at Sullivan & Cromwell, American Express, Citibank (AGC), and most recently at State Street (MD), where she led a 30+ global team.

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