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Just One Step

Career Development



If you get nothing else from this column other than the importance of being self-aware and intentional about the pursuit of your goals, then my job here is done. Personal development and growth is no small feat. In fact, it's a multi-billion dollar business, which suggests that it isn't easy. It's not my assertion that growth is hard, but I do contend that we need to acknowledge that growing, and growing well, takes time and effort. Growing well requires being in touch with ourselves and our place in the world. It requires being intentional in our efforts to change.

Of course, all this growing and changing can be overwhelming. It requires knowing what needs to be done and formulating a plan to do it. And that's before actually putting the plan into action. However, there's good news: We don't have to have all the answers and we don't have to do everything at once. It all starts with just one step.

As lawyers, almost all of us have been to college and law school (I'm allowing for those few who may have achieved their current position by some other method such as chamber studies). To prepare for higher education, we identified possible education options, applied to each school, selected our choice, and made a plethora of other decisions. It was likely overwhelming and, for some of us, drove us to the point of paralysis. However, we did it then and must continue to do it in the future. It all starts by taking one step.

Since we've all navigated that journey (however we did it), we'll explore a different scenario here. And since few things excite me as much as writing about leadership, we'll look at a simple leadership situation, which can be extrapolated and applied to more complex circumstances.

As ACC members, one of the easiest ways to get involved is to join a committee. Let's say you want to be the committee's chair. You could either be overwhelmed by the prospect of ascending to this top spot, or you could develop a plan and move toward your goal step-by-step.

The one-step method is empowering because it is almost impossible to take an incorrect step. If we identify the steps needed to get from where we are to where we want to be, the worst that can happen is that we take a step that is out of order. Being stressed and overwhelmed comes from focusing on the perceived shortage of resources for the demands in front of us.

The problem isn't what's on our plates, but it's the thinking that we cannot handle the workload. That is, we don't think that we have the time, skills, connections, or other needed resources to do what we need to do.

When was the last time you brushed your teeth and all you did was brush your teeth? Unless you are extremely mindful in every situation, you probably cannot say that you have ever just brushed your teeth. Instead, while your hands were performing the motions involved in teeth brushing, your mind was somewhere else.

You were probably obsessing over your to-do list for the day, contemplating conversations you need to have with people in the office, dreading the unpleasant conversations, wondering what you were going to have for dinner, or acknowledging that yet another day would pass without exercise. As all these thoughts were dancing in your head, the perception, accurate or not, that you didn't have the time or energy to keep up with the ever-growing mountain of activities swept over you.

The answer to addressing our stress is not necessarily to eliminate things off our to-do list, but rather to focus on one task at a time. When we start down a new path of thinking, especially a path that is not grounded in reality, we create a new reality based in our new perception. The best thing is to pick a step — any step — and start moving.

[Whitnie Wiley](#)



Former ACC Docket Columnist

Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.