

Attributes of Success

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Many of us take our personality traits for granted. Those blessed with the right nature or nurture do just fine, often without reflecting on the reasons for their success. Others continually get in their own way. Most of us probably fall somewhere in the middle. From time to time, associates who are especially eager to succeed ask me to discuss the attributes of the most successful—and least successful—attorneys. Here, in no particular order, are the words and phrases I find myself repeating.

Attributes of Success

- Drive
- A “can do” attitude
- Positive energy
- A strong moral and ethical compass
- Self-aware
- Responsive
- Conscientious and thorough
- Good communicator
- Focused on internal and external “client’s” success
- Beats deadlines
- Follows through and follows up
- Creative
- Courteous, respectful, and deferential
- Strength of conviction
- Operates within authority

- Seeks help when needed
- Courageous
- Good sense of humor
- Goal oriented
- Tireless
- Team player
- Takes ownership
- Admits and learns from mistakes
- Wants to be the best
- Cares about others

Attributes of Failure

- Lacks drive
- Careless
- Poor time management skills
- Lacks self-awareness
- Dishonest with self and others
- Defensive
- Lacks ownership
- Upward delegator
- Fails to take initiative
- Entitlement attitude
- Clock watcher
- Makes excuses
- Divisive personality
- Competes with colleagues

- Poor communicator
- Misses deadlines without notice
- Handles only one project well at a time
- Overly impatient
- Exceeds authority
- Overly stubborn
- Arrogant and prideful
- Disrespectful to staff or peers
- Resents and resists constructive criticism
- Chronically underemployed
- Inflexible
- Works only for “billable credit” or dollars
- Lacks goals
- Procrastinates
- Overly fearful
- Fails to grow
- Lacks resilience
- Self-absorbed
- Disdainful of firm policies and expectations
- Overly aggressive
- Refuses to seek help

Self-Improvement I did not pull these traits out of thin air. We see them time and time again in people who succeed and in those who fail inside and outside our law firm. Why bother to list them? They are relevant to us as an employer. We look for these attributes when we recruit attorneys and staff, and when we make judgments about retention or promotion. We discuss these characteristics frequently inside the firm. As I noted, our most successful colleagues want the benefit of our experience to learn what behaviors can help or hurt their careers. Some of these attributes may be deeply ingrained, of course, and some are easier to identify than others. You have to start with

sufficient drive and self-awareness even to care about whether you are the best you can be. Every highly successful person works continuously at getting better. This is easier said than done, but getting better must start with a candid self-assessment of our strengths and weaknesses measured against criteria taken from the crucible of experience.

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