

Passion + Focus = Success in Life and Law

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on May 30, 2013

Over the Memorial Day weekend, I had the honor of playing golf with two veterans of the Iraq war, in a charity tournament dedicated to the support of the educational needs of families of deceased and injured military personnel. Everyone present – from the organizers to the volunteers to the golfers (military, celebrities, and the rest of us) – displayed a heartwarming passion for our country and for the cause. The men I played with had tremendous passion for life and for our country – and for enjoying the day. Due to that passion, the event was a tremendous success.

Successful lawyers are tremendously passionate people – about life and about their businesses. At the post-golf dinner, I was sitting with the local Office Managing Partner of a large out-of-state firm, who had built a successful office from scratch over the past few years. Hard work? No doubt. Focus? Definitely. And passion? This was demonstrated clearly to me when he gave me his business card because he gave me two – one for his firm, and the second for his role at another charity that he founded. His organization supports different and equally important, needs of our military service personnel. He told me “my law job is what I do so I can do what I really love.” Passion? Absolutely!

Most lawyers are committed to giving back. Pro bono programs flourish, supporting any number of worthwhile endeavors, the sum of which contributes greatly to our society and to our communities. From my observations, the truly successful lawyers go beyond commitment to complete passion for everything they do. It is not limited to their pro bono efforts but is completely and intensely focused on their practices and, for firm leaders, on the businesses of their firms.

Last week I met with the Managing Partner and Chair of a major international firm. This firm has had extraordinary success over the years, by any normal measure. Nonetheless, both of these lawyers had a clear focus on, and passion for, building the firm they see as possible, going well beyond the one they already have. They were completely and intensely focused on what would be needed to reach the next level, and were individually fully committed to achieving that in spite of what would clearly be a path strewn with incredibly hard work and many difficult decisions. Neither of them need the requisite hard work – they are both tremendously successful individuals. Their passion for their firm and what they believe it can be drives them to go well beyond what many Managing Partners are willing to do, and is clearly their key to success. “Too hard” is not an acceptable answer.

Jim Collins begins his famous book, Good to Great, with the statement that the “Good is the enemy of the Great.” There are many good organizations in the world, whether charities, businesses or law firms. How many of them are truly “Great”? Surprisingly few law firms would measure up. The ones that do, though, share a common characteristic – passionate leadership, which is fully committed to whatever steps are needed to achieve the firm’s potential, not just the easy ones. As a firm leader, ask yourself: “Am I really willing to do what it takes to get our firm where it can potentially go?” If not, perhaps you are not the right leader, and your firm should be looking for someone who truly does have the passion to drive change and success.