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THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S INITIATIVES AT LAW FIRMS

A woman who breaks down the barriers she has erected against other women is likely to find that, by contributing to another's success, she is enhancing her own. By finding opportunities to work together, learn from each other, and share experiences, women create a collective path to their individual success.

Many firms are beginning to support that journey through the creation of Women's Initiatives designed to provide women with the tools they need to succeed. Although they range tremendously in scope and sophistication, these initiatives offer skill-building and related training opportunities, the development of business networks, and provide a safe environment for women to discuss issues of concern. And even as these initiatives are a product of the energy and involvement of a firm's female lawyers, they cannot succeed without clear and visible senior management support.

It is also critical to ensure that the activities of the initiative are the product of significant input. At their best, these initiatives serve to build a stronger internal network of women who will advocate for institutional changes and serve to support the external business development activities of women lawyers. One partner in a national law firm described her firm's Women's Initiative:

We do some coaching and training of the women in the office at every-other-month meetings. Sometimes we bring in outsiders. Sometimes we have people from inside, and talk about everything from public speaking to networking...

... And then we do things with outside organizations. ... And then we try to vet opportunities for women out there in the community and act as a resource. ... Or try to figure out which of the different charities are good to be involved with. ... the whole purpose of it is to help women become more economically successful.

She noted that their firm's Women's Initiative now has a National Coordinator to implement activities at the firm's many branch offices, including opportunities to bring the women partners together. The sophistication of this firm's efforts is being matched across the country, as law firms become increasingly adept at creating the internal and external networks to help women in firms get to know each other and bring women business leaders together with women attorneys.

Those involved in establishing Women's Initiatives, however, must resist efforts to "measure" the success of the Initiative by tracking new clients or new business directly attributable to these efforts. This is a false measurement and would only undermine the reason for establishing such an Initiative in the first place – which is, to assist the firm's efforts in the retention and promotion of women attorneys. Accordingly, to the extent a firm seeks to measure

the success of its Women's Initiative, it should track the number of women it has retained, and how many are elevated to partnership and firm leadership positions.

This point is critical to the underlying value and importance of these efforts. The purpose of a Women's Initiative is to focus on ways women can succeed in the firm. Accordingly, even though management support is a crucial component, it is women who must drive the agenda and identify the measures of success.

One highly successful female partner urged women to ignore the external impediments to their success, and instead charge forward with their own plan:

Women have, a lot of times, got unconscious beliefs that they can't do something or that they will be stopped. They never explore it. They just don't go there. So I think every woman has got to go within and figure out what they really want to do – not what they think they can have – but what they really want to do and then look in their own minds for their beliefs about why they can't do it. And then go for it anyway. Because you find that a lot of the stuff just melts away once you have stopped empowering it in your own consciousness.

She recommended that women take matters into their own hands when confronted with a problem they want solved, by forging ahead on their own:

What they need to focus on is what they want to get done. And just go and get it done. It puts you in a very different posture

in the firm. And it leads to very different consequences. I have spent many years in this firm trying to solve the problems, and then I just decided I was going to go for what I wanted. I was much happier.

Other advice offered by women ranged from the general to the specific. Several women observed that some of their colleagues moved too quickly to a reduced-hours schedule, even where they were, in reality, maintaining a relatively full-time work load. One partner recalled her conversation with another woman in the firm who was planning to work one less day a week:

I advised against it. ... I advised her...not to voluntarily take less. Because if you look around, you will have men at any given time who are not doing that much. And there is no reason to take a step down. No one will really say anything to you, unless you voluntarily go and do that. Because sometimes I think women are more conscientious that way – they think they are not giving their all. But if you look around there are some men associates who are doing a lot more than them, but most of them aren't. They don't ever say: "Oh I am slow. Dock my salary."

Other suggestions ranged from the importance of developing a self-confident demeanor to tips on style and presentation. A number of women interviewed stressed the power of exuding self-confidence.

Almost without exception, the advice women offered for each other was to develop a self-confident style and recognize the importance of relationships. Perhaps, then, once the role

model designation begins to feel more comfortable, women can take note of their own power and work together to implement significant change.

Finally, women must let go of the illusion of perfection. Most women feel an incredible obligation to be perfect – at work and at home. But it is really the illusion of perfection they are chasing, since no one actually attains this elusive status. By sharing experiences – and imperfections – it may be possible to tear down the isolation and unrealistic striving towards goals that may not, in truth, be desired.

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