Building a Book of Business and Advancing to Law Firm Leadership: Women who Have Navigated the Course Discuss Core Elements of Success

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At a time when only 4 percent of the 200 largest U.S. law firms have women in firm-wide leadership positions, only 19% of the equity partners at the “50 Best Law Firms for Women” are women and 96% of AmLaw firms report that their highest paid partner is male, it seems opportune to see what women in leadership roles have to say about advancing to firm leadership, strategies for building a book of business, mentorship, and ways they have found and nurtured success. The National Law Review connected with attorneys Ann Zucker and Anthoula Pomrening at this year’s Managing Partner Forum’s Leadership Conference in Atlanta, GA. We recently had the opportunity to speak with them, as well as attorney Paula Fritsch, regarding their leadership roles at their firms.

Communication, Transparency and Trust Building at all Levels of the Firm

Navigating a leadership role can be a challenge, but communication and transparency go a long way. Zucker, of Carmody Torrance Sandak & Hennessey LLP, points out that “Trust among the lawyers in our firm is based upon predictability, transparency and forthrightness….the leadership team can foster that atmosphere by modeling those traits.” Along those lines, Fritsch of McDonnell Boehnen Hulbert & Berghoff LLP says “Communication is key….I’ve seen the biggest strides when the partnership can have open and frank discussions about an issue. Issues that are decided through back channel and closed door discussions can result in division.” Zucker agrees, saying “Communicating with the partners and employees frequently about what is going on at the firm encourages an atmosphere of trust.”

But, trust building and effective communication doesn’t happen overnight; it is a long, strenuous process. points out that it is too early to begin building the trust, even if you aren’t in a position of power in your firm. She says, “The trust building process is long term, it doesn’t begin when you start work on the Executive Committee.” Earlier leadership positions help build the trust, but being a presence at the firm and having relationships with colleagues, no matter where you are in the firm or where your career is at the moment is important. As Pomrening, of McDonnell Boehnen Hulbert & Berghoff LLP, points out, “I began as a law clerk 19 years ago; I have known many of these people for almost 20 years.”

In any leadership role, however, being able to tune into what is best for the firm as a whole is crucial. Zucker says, “decisions in a law firm are tough because sometimes there are conflicts among what’s best for the client, what’s best for the firm and what’s best for the individual lawyer. I think some of the blurriness disappears if you can identify the answer to each of those questions.” Pomrening agrees, saying, “You have to think about the whole—what’s the best thing for the clients and the firm, rather than an individual attorney? I try to stress that in whatever I do on a daily basis. Whether it’s a pitch or identifying a leadership position for somebody else, I’m always looking at it in terms of what is best for the whole.”
Own Your Destiny - Build a Book of Business

One important thing for all attorneys and success in a law firm environment is being able to find ways to nurture and build your own book of business. Being able to successfully generate new matters for the firm is an important step in finding success, wherever your career takes you. Fritsch says, “You have to get yourself out there and make yourself visible. Pick an area that interests you and become an expert in that area, and if that is in a niche space, even better.” Ann Zucker emphasizes that the best way for individuals to generate business is to do what they like to do. She says, “You have to do what you are comfortable doing. If you do something you are not comfortable doing it’s going to show and it’s not going to be useful. For example, if your thing is talking on panels on a specific topic, then do that. If you like to write articles, then focus your time on that. You don’t have enough time to do things that you don’t like or that you are not good at. But you need to figure out what’s best for you, where do you shine and focus your efforts there.”

Find Someone or a Group of Someones Who Can Help You Through the Process - Keep up Your End of the Relationship

Mentorship is also important when establishing yourself in a law firm, both in honing legal skills and building the relationships that are so crucial to generating business. Though it can be tricky for some younger female associates to develop such relationships as the vast majority of practice groups leaders and other law firm management members are older males. Zucker says, “A good mentor puts you in a position where you can grow and learn, and they are always going to be cognizant of that--if it’s taking you to court, bringing you to a client pitch, taking you along even if you are not necessarily needed--so you can develop relationships. These are opportunities to develop legal skills, but also business--Clients get to see you and you have to get out there for people to get to know you.” In order to make a mentor relationship work, it takes effort on both parts. Paula Fritsch says, “A mentee should be open with the mentor about what they want out of the relationship, and the mentor may have different ideas for the relationship.”

As with everything, communication is key. Zucker points out that the relationship requires time and effort, saying, “Both the mentor and the mentee need to take time to nurture the relationship. Whether official or unofficial relationships, you need to spend time--lunch, cup of coffee, to check in to see how things are going, what opportunities they are looking for.” As with any meaningful relationship, sometimes things need to be said that are hard to hear. Fritsch suggests, “as a mentee, be prepared to take some criticisms from your mentor – they may have some things to share that are hard to hear, but a good mentor shares the good and the bad to help you grow.”

Another strategy Anthoula Pomrening suggests is to have a group of trusted colleagues as a sounding board. These are individuals you can run ideas by, and try things out on to see how they sound or how to approach a problem. By trying different approaches--out loud, you can get a sense of what resonates and perhaps more importantly, what doesn’t. Pomrening says, “This group can help you address certain situations that you aren't sure how to approach, and it is very useful.”

Even though women and men enter law school in equal numbers, and work next to each other as associates in equal numbers, a huge disparity in leadership positions and income still exists at law firms. Women who have moved up in the ranks despite the odds, build trust and relationships early in their careers and as they advance. Young female law firm associates who want to advance and prosper generally do best when they find not only a mentor, but a sponsor or community of advisors who can help them navigate the hidden rules of advancement in their firm’s hierarchy and discover the tools necessary to build a book of business.

It’s been noted in numerous surveys and articles that female attorney’s median billable and total hours generally lag male attorneys at all levels. However, for nonbillable hours, women above the associate level record significantly more hours than male attorneys.⁶ Many thanks to the women who took the time to contribute their thoughts, suggestions and nonbillable time to this article.

[1] Large Law Firms are Failing Women Lawyers, the Washington Post, February 18, 2014
[4] Anthoula Pomrening is an Intellectual Property partner with McDonnell Boehnen Hulbert & Berghoff LLP.