

DIVERSITY DIALOGUE BROADENING BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES

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Tips from the Trenches: Women in Law Firm Leadership Share Their Wisdom

This past June, a group of women managing partners and legal thought leaders came together virtually to share their wisdom and experience. The pandemic has prevented many of these meetings from taking place in person; the online format did not deter participants and their willingness to share from their hearts.



SHARON MEIT ABRAHAMS, EdD

President

Legal Talent Advisors, LLC

I was privileged to cohost the conference and moderate the panel “Tips from the Trenches.” The most important lesson we all took away from the program is to be true to yourself, no matter what role you play at your firm. Along with this powerful message, we gained a few more insights.

Every woman leader comes to her role with a personal set of management skills. These skills might have been learned by watching other leaders or through the concerted effort of reading leadership books or attending management development programs. No matter how she honed her skills, they will be unique to her personal style. And one thing was clear from the conversation: not everyone is cut out to be a leader of lawyers.

WHAT IT TAKES TO LEAD IN LAW FIRMS

Many of us have heard the phrase “herding cats” when it comes to leading or managing lawyers. Many of the women leaders at this event shared the emotional investment they make to lead their firms. They talked about the time-consuming nature of building consensus. They even mentioned the time they take to get to know every lawyer and staff member. They want to do this.

Many women tend to adopt a nurturing style, as one of the panelists shared. They tend to be more empathetic, enjoy building effective teams and work toward everyone “getting along.” But for attorneys, dedicating so much time and energy to this style of leadership can contribute to their billable productivity taking a hit.

Of note for legal managers working with female attorneys: All the guest speakers shared the critical value of building a strong book of business before raising your hand for a leadership role. Establishing your credibility in a firm is foundational to success, and that credibility is always tied to rainmaking skills instead of leadership qualities. Most professional service firms have this quirk, but especially law firms. In fact, it’s common practice to take successful rainmakers and give them administrative leadership duties. But this is not always a recipe for success for men or women leaders.

BUILDING A SOLID SUPPORT SYSTEM

Women have a higher hurdle to achieve success in their firms beyond their revenue production. For example, the women on the panel called out the disproportionate responsibilities that fall on women outside their professional lives. One of the managing partners summed it up by saying: “Don’t do anything you can hire someone else to do for you.” She clarified that she abided by this rule at work as well as in her home life. This line of discussion concluded with an acknowledgement that, as a successful lawyer, she had the financial resources to build the support system she needed outside of work.

A support system inside the firm is also an important piece of the puzzle. Firm leaders need to create environments that assist women attorneys by having policies around flexible work schedules and systems that adjust to the needs of the women depending on the stage of their careers. Having the right tools and enough staff are also key factors for women to be successful at their firms. All the panelists shared how their firms have gone the extra mile to build firms that support women attorneys.

PRIORITIZING PERSONALLY AND PROFESSIONALLY

When the question was asked about setting personal priorities, it became clear that each leader achieved her success by creating their own path. One of the managing partners called herself “hard-core” and shared that though she encourages others to take advantage of flex time in her firm, she never did. It was reassuring to hear another panelist mention that she was a part-time partner when she was elected to manage the firm. Hearing both paths made it clear that individuals have to set their own boundaries and priorities as they manage their careers.

The final discussion was around life outside the law firm. The panelists shared, again, that each had their own unique needs. One panelist chooses to dedicate her time away from work to family, while another talked about going out with girlfriends.

One of the managing partners discussed the need to be a multidimensional person and approach life with curiosity; this also drives her activities away from the office. No matter what an individual enjoys when not at the office, the panelists all agreed that women need to let go of guilt so they can appreciate this time fully.

Moderating the conversation among this group of successful and powerful women was a great honor. They were all genuine, told wonderful stories and shared their wisdom freely. We need to create more of these types of programs so other women coming down the road have tips from those who have traveled before them.

About the Author

Sharon Meit Abrahams, EdD, is a legal talent development expert with 30 years of experience coaching lawyers and advising firms on culture, DEI and the lawyer life cycle from new associate to retirement.

Email