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Women Lawyers



Women Mentors and Sponsors: The XX Factor to Breaking the Glass Ceiling in Law

BY ALISON L. TSAO

Why do women make up only 21% of all equity partners and 31% of all non-equity partners at law firms, when they make up 57.4% of incoming law school students?

What has been the barrier to women attaining leadership positions at law firms and corporate legal departments? Although the answers to these questions are assuredly multi-faceted and can easily fill a law review article, many successful women attorneys would agree that they could not have achieved their professional objectives and leadership positions without female mentors and sponsors.

The last two years of the pandemic have caused a larger portion of female attorneys, compared to male attorneys, to leave big law or otherwise dial back their careers to provide for needed childcare, homeschooling or other family obligations. This phenomenon has led commentators to question whether, despite increased numbers of women entering the legal profession, historical bias and stereotypes about women continue to plague our profession. If so, can the roles played by women as mentors and sponsors to more junior female attorneys make a difference in turning the tide? I submit that the answer is, unequivocally, yes.

What is the difference between a mentor and a sponsor? Simply put, a mentor provides guidance and support and a sponsor advocates for

you when you are not in the room. A mentor is typically an experienced lawyer who is willing to support a junior lawyer and impart knowledge and skills to their mentee on general career advice. These lawyers can help orient new lawyers to the workplace and to the legal practice, introduce them to other senior lawyers, and share with them the unwritten rules of their firm or legal department. Different from a mentor, a sponsor can unlock the doors to advancement. A sponsor makes sure that their protégé is “on the radar” of other decision-makers as a “rising star.” For example, they might promote the protégé in preparation for key advancement and elevation opportunities, recommend them for a raise or bonus, or provide them with other similar opportunities. They can also ensure their protégé’s placement on high profile cases and projects to gain visibility, and provide access to key clients and contacts. They essentially use their seat at the table to promote those they sponsor. Both mentors and sponsors are key ingredients to the advancement of women in the legal profession. While mentors and sponsors can be male or female, I further submit that female mentors and sponsors offer a unique perspective and benefit to their female mentees and protégés.

Marie DiSante, Firm Managing Partner and a founder of CDF Labor Law LLP, stated: “When I started my legal career



in the late 1980’s, mentors and leaders in big law firms were mostly men. So when I started CDF Labor Law with my other partners in the early 90’s, I made certain that diversity and inclusion were top priorities from day one. Having a seat at the table, I have sponsored many women over the years. This has encompassed making certain that women lawyers are appointed to critical leadership committees, assigned to important roles on key cases, and given the resources they need to develop their own books of business and to thrive in their legal careers.”

Since there are far fewer women attorneys in leadership positions, their personal experiences are invaluable because they can advise on what pitfalls to avoid, and how they have overcome challenges on their journeys. Kate Djavakhyan, Corporate

Counsel-Employment at Google, shared that, "I have benefitted from female mentors because they have been honest and generous in their feedback of me which have helped me grow professionally. In addition, they are willing to be vulnerable in sharing their worst moments and how they learned from those experiences and overcame adversity."

Women in leadership positions can also more easily identify situations where junior female attorneys may unwittingly perpetuate stereotypical behavior, for example, by assuming "housekeeping" or administrative-type duties on cases and projects. Ms. Djavakhyan adds, "having someone with your best interest at heart telling you to stop doing something detrimental to your career is very helpful!" Women are also well-positioned to share successful tips and strategies on how they are able to manage (balance would be a misnomer!) the demands of their legal profession with competing family obligations. This reminds me of the helpful saying I read somewhere that, "you can do anything, but you can't do every-

thing." Too often, female attorneys believe that they must be perfect and must do everything to be successful – which is simply not true.

Women mentors also take the time to ask their mentees about their aspirations instead of making assumptions about them, and are thus able to tailor their advice accordingly. For example, Bettina Yip, VP, Legal at Petco, recalled that a male General Counsel mentor assumed she wanted to become a GC just like him. In contrast, one of her female mentors (who is a female GC) actually asked her what she wanted not only in her career but also in her life. In addition, Ms. Yip said she learned invaluable skills from her female mentors in the negotiation process as she sought new jobs and career opportunities. Although salary is and will remain an important piece of the negotiations, Ms. Yip learned from her female mentors to negotiate for a more complete compensation package, including non-monetary terms like time off, and the ability to attend legal conferences that can also be beneficial to the company.

Female mentors serve as important role models to show junior women attorneys what is possible. They help the junior attorneys understand how women may be perceived in the workplace, and to navigate around what may otherwise be blind spots. Most law firms often have mentoring programs in place, but where might one find ready and willing female mentors outside of your organization? Your local bar associations are a good place to start. "Join their mentoring programs," Ms. Yip advised. "Don't be afraid to approach mentors with requests for their time over coffee, or ask for a Zoom meeting – but come prepared with questions." You will be surprised at how readily most women respond to these requests for wisdom from a stranger, because these women who have managed to break the glass ceiling are ready to pay it forward.

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