



Women Champions

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By Debra Forman

Women lawyers will develop their practice and client development skills more effectively if they are mentored and championed by other women lawyers. Intuitively, this is a no brainer: Women lawyers helping other women lawyers succeed. The recognition of women lawyers as firm leaders is developing momentum, but there is still a long way to go. Former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright acknowledged the need for more professional solidarity among women when she delivered this punch line in her 2006 address to the WNBA's All-Decade Team at the "Celebrating Inspiration" luncheon, "There is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women."

Why Now?

Women lawyers as role models, teachers and champions of women lawyers is a relatively new phenomenon. It has only been in the last 25 or so years that women lawyers have visibly gained seats at law firm tables. They are taking their places beside their male counterparts because they have also established valuable and sustainable client relationships. These successful leaders have earned the clout to champion other women lawyers.

For more than 50 years, there has been marked progress by women in breaking through gender-charged barriers and career-challenging ceilings. Empowering women to strive for other professions and life experiences continue to be relevant markers today. Yes, great strides have been made by women lawyers to earn prominent and visible roles in senior management, to direct company boards, negotiate in boardrooms and lead in firm executive committees. But women professionals also need to focus their talents on bringing other women lawyers up through the ranks and championing their successes.

Championing might not be embraced by all female lawyers. Potential women champions may hesitate or even balk at the notion of championing other women, voicing various reasons, such as, "Oh, I don't think I have anything of note to offer other women." Or, "I didn't have a woman mentor or champion assist me when I was building my practice. Why should I help anyone else build theirs?" And, "I guess I should champion, but I have no idea how or where to start."

These self-doubters should think about themselves and the women lawyers they can help. Championing other women lawyers will also benefit the women leaders who assume this essential role within the firm. It will assert their leadership qualities, acknowledge their influence, demonstrate their competence, and nurture their relationships with smart and ambitious colleagues.

Secretary Albright's message underlies the ongoing need for women to help other women. Regardless of their seniority, women attorneys want and need internal (and external) champions to enable them to succeed and reach their goals. And there are no better champions for women lawyers than other women lawyers.

Championing at Law Firms

The current law firm environment is ripe for championing. Following the recent economic downturn, there is a stronger focus at law firms on bottom lines: what lawyers are bringing to the table in terms of business development, origination and client service. Even very capable lawyers may find themselves jockeying for a place at their firms, particularly when they have limited books of business or minimal specialty skills.

Five years ago, there would have been no issue with them servicing other lawyers or having generalist practices. Today, there

is a different reality. The new normal at law firms is a more focused hard line on business generation. Adding pressure to these lawyers is the steady stream of laterals who are joining firms with books of business — and being awarded decision-making powers at their new firms, commensurate with their books.

What does this mean for law firms' women lawyers? Today's senior women practitioners are at fascinating crossroads: When they started their practices, there were few women lawyers practicing at firms and even fewer senior women practitioners to act as role models or champions. The numbers of women lawyers entering law schools and law firms have been increasing steadily through the last 20 years, with an explosion of women lawyers streaming through during the last decade. There is now an abundance of young women lawyers to mentor and champion.

There really is no better time than now for successful women law firm leaders to champion other women lawyers to excel in business development, client retention, and practice and talent management. In other words, today is the time to prepare these young lawyers to become tomorrow's firm leaders. Young, mid-level and even senior women who have yet to taste "on-the-chart" success would greatly benefit from the support of women leaders who "get it" and have achieved success. When carried out effectively, championing is a win-win for all involved parties: the women doing the championing, the women being championed and the law firms where all these women practice law.

Factors for Success

The ultimate success of championed relationships rests on three key factors: 1) the effectiveness of the women lawyers doing the championing; 2) the women lawyers selected to be championed; and 3) the firms' perception and support of the women champions and the women being championed. Let's look at these three essential elements individually to understand the process.

Attributes of a Successful Champion

What does it take for a woman leader to be a successful champion in a law firm? She must be grounded in authenticity, confidence and credibility, all effective traits for the highly visible and potentially challenging role of championing and unwaveringly supporting a woman colleague wanting to reach important milestones.

The authenticity factor relates directly to the woman lawyer champion: who she is, what she is about and the values that inform her actions. Her authenticity is her moral compass, the lens through which she perceives herself as a legal leader and colors her interactions, with her clients, her partners, and her team. Her authenticity is embedded in all aspects of style, including how she communicates, thinks, responds, negotiates, strategizes and empathizes. Her authenticity sets her apart from other lawyers and is influential in drawing her clients and colleagues toward her.

The woman lawyer champion's confidence is anchored by her client service: the years she has spent developing strong relationships with existing and new clients, and the growing book of business that have emerged from these relationships over years of practice. Her confidence is also buoyed by her personal branding and self-marketing, her trusted reputation and how key stakeholders perceive her. By demonstrating her interpersonal and leadership skills, she emulates good firm citizenship through her many non-billable and essential firm activities, such as committee work, mentoring and administrative responsibilities, just to highlight a few of her many commitments.

All of these attributes contribute to the woman lawyer champion's credibility. Leveraged by her legal knowledge and expertise, the woman lawyer champion consistently brings value to her stakeholders. In terms of her professional persona, she possesses unwavering ethical standards. Her savvy business acumen and strong leadership skills are complimented by her efficient work regimen and ready accessibility. Her originations, billings and billing realizations depict an effective relationship builder who has the trust and respect of her clients. A frequent networker, she develops prospects into new clients, consistently grows and sustains existing client relationships and frequently cross-sells firm colleagues and capabilities. Her value as a partner and rainmaker is evident when the chart columns are calculated at split times.

Her credibility attributes also include those factors that are less tangible than economic benefits, but just as critical when determining the values she brings to her firm: the formal and informal training and development of her teams; her firm citizen contributions; her willingness and availability to pitch in whenever her expertise or opinions are required; her sought-after input for reviewing tough opinions; and answering difficult questions or being a safe haven for testing new ideas.

Selecting Women Lawyers to Champion

Being effective as a woman lawyer champion also takes great judgment, especially as it pertains to choosing the right women

lawyers to champion. It should go without saying that selecting the right woman lawyer to champion is one of the key ingredients in a successful championing campaign. As previously mentioned, there have never been more women at law schools and law firms than currently. The fortunate dilemma for each woman lawyer champion is to choose the right woman lawyer from the wealth of candidates available to champion.

When selecting a lawyer to champion, each woman champion turns to her unique foundation, the attributes that make her an ideal leader. Her credibility is really on the line with her choice. Judgement will play a significant role in the choice: the champion's judgment in choosing the woman, and the firm's judgment of the champion she has chosen. It follows that the champion will have strong personal and professional views on what she is looking for in the woman lawyer she will champion, including an analysis of specific traits, behaviors, skills and interests.

Championing a young woman lawyer is as much about the young lawyer as it is about the champion. Everyone must have skin in the game for championing to be successful. Each woman lawyer should be functioning on a daily basis as if she was being considered each day as a candidate for championing. How else can she differentiate herself from others being considered? She should be regularly displaying her drive and confidence, her developing client skills and her hunger to succeed and take on further responsibilities. If she truly wants to be successful, the young woman lawyer should let senior women lawyers know why she deserves to be championed.

For her part, the senior woman lawyer wants to champion a woman lawyer who will bring out her best skills: whether she is mentoring, delivering tough messages or sharing client particulars. As with any relationship, championing will take time and resources. The champion will need to moor her confidence in the process by pacing her interactions and involvement. Mutual respect for the process will enable both women to develop a lasting rapport and develop a trust that will build a rock-solid relationship.

Validating Successful Champions

The final leg of the championing process is the firm's acknowledgement and endorsement of the results achieved. This final piece of the process validates each participant: the woman lawyer champion for her successful championing of the woman lawyer she selected; the selected woman lawyer for rising to confidence placed in her; and the firm for providing a supportive platform for career building and professional development.

Through championing efforts, women lawyers help women lawyers succeed. They strongly signal to their firms the unquestionable power and values to be found in professional solidarity.

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