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Progress and Milestones: Recognize and Celebrate



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I WOULD LIKE FOR YOU to seriously consider a few facts, the first of which is that today, there are three women attorneys who sit on the U.S. Supreme Court, representing one-third of the total composition of arguably the most powerful and significant judicial body in the world.

Fact number two: In the United States, women comprise 48 percent of all law school graduates and 45 percent of all associates in private law firms.¹ Indeed,

the 2013 class profiles for prestigious law schools like Yale included 50 percent women; New York University School of Law included 43 percent women and Harvard Law School included 48 percent women.²

Fact number three: As of March 2009, approximately 33 percent of new partner promotions in New York City signatory law firms were women and women represented 17.8 percent of management committee members at these same firms.³

As encouraging as these facts and statistics may be, they certainly don't eradicate the well-documented challenges that women in the law contend with on a daily basis. Particularly since many of these challenges are qualitative and not quantitative in nature, we rarely appreciate the full scope of their impact on how women practice law. And, it is indisputable that there is significant work to be done in order to create a level playing field for a more realistically inclusive law firm environment especially as it relates to women attorneys of color.

But the gains and accomplishments of women attorneys cannot and should not be ignored. Little by little, inch by inch and mile by mile, women are beginning to seize a more significant role as key players in the legal industry. As such, it becomes imperative that we recognize our progress, celebrate our milestones and, critically important, introduce a new tone and rhetoric into the discussion about women in the law: that of empowerment and success.

So, let's give a thunderous round of applause to Supreme Court Associate Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan (who, by the way, is a Hunter College High School alumnus, just like me—go Hunter!). Each Associate Justice represents a journey and success story that is immensely inspirational and a tremendous source of pride for the numerous women attorneys who continue to move forward in the legal profession.

Let's also acknowledge, encourage and celebrate every single woman attorney (including women law students): whether you are a law firm associate, partner, counsel, in-house counsel, court clerk or somewhere in between, your career

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choice is a living manifestation of a long and hard fought journey.

This journey started with Belle (Arabella) Mansfield, who, in 1869, became the first woman ever admitted to practice law in the world;⁴ continued with Sandra Day O'Connor, who, in 1981, became the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States;⁵ and progresses today with every woman who dares to be a member of the legal profession. Ladies, take a collective bow.

Sustaining Empowerment and Success

In remembering the journey and celebrating progress we need to move forward to sustainable empowerment and success. Complacency with hard-fought accomplishments typically creates regression and we definitely don't want to go down that forbidden road.

Therefore, the dialogue must not only embrace a continuum of the efforts that created the existing platform but also must consider an emerging voice: one that has the fire to ensure that historical gains are maintained and maximized, but one that also has the temperament to ensure that women in the law move into the 21st century with a viable platform.

In considering various success strategies, I consulted with a few dynamic women partners in New York City to discuss their professional trajectories, and asked them to share their thoughts on how to navigate the sometimes uncertain and intimidating terrain of a law career. What made them successful? How did male mentors play a role in their professional development? How should women in the law prepare for the next level in a 21st century economy? And, what should women law students and junior attorneys consider when making career choices?

Even though these discussions were limited to women law firm partners, it has to be emphasized that there are many, many successful women attorneys who are not law firm partners and who are enjoying tremendous career satisfaction in other significant and equally meaningful ways.

However, given the tremendous difficulty in making partner in New York, it made sense to speak to those women who had accomplished this tremendous feat and remained in this challenging role.

Really Work the Success Strategies

When assessing the day-to-day aspects of a legal career, a few key success strategies emerged as central to creating and maintaining rewarding results: generating an excellent work product; persistent and focused discipline;

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maintaining long-term relationships; and, mentors.

Sounds familiar? Well, it should; if there was some big secret to women's success lurking behind closed doors that only revealed itself in the past year then shame on us for missing it.

Although, these strategies are wonderfully simple and sublime, oftentimes practitioners lack consciousness about their importance to long-term career viability. Certainly, it's not difficult to comprehend the idea of mentors as a basic, intelligent concept. What escapes many women lawyers, however, is the actual and deliberate implementation of mentoring as a consistent career dynamic.

So while many women diligently attend

conferences, panels and the like and hear these words of wisdom repeated over and over again, it doesn't always translate into their actual career experience. In other words, women attorneys have to move past the old-school rhetoric of what we need to succeed and move to the new school rhetoric of what we need to do and get it done.

Understand Their Practical Meaning

Another challenge, and what can be even more perplexing, is understanding just what these various concepts truly mean from a practical standpoint.

For example, if you're a junior associate and you've just turned in a brief, or research memorandum or some other written document, how do you know if you've provided a solid work product? Tracy High, a partner at Sullivan & Cromwell, suggests that when you submit an assignment ask yourself, "Is this the best that I can do under the circumstances?"

For Ms. High, that means taking complete ownership over your work product and being completely comfortable knowing that you've given it your absolute best, whether it's a last-minute assignment or one produced with minimal sleep.

Ms. High underscores the importance of consistently producing solid work because it will "lead to more challenging assignments and that's how you learn." She also emphasizes that it is essential to be open to criticism:

"You have to stay in the game to get experience and be willing to accept criticism and incorporate that criticism into your practice—don't let it shake your confidence."

Not only will developing the reputation for doing solid work lead to better assignments and greater practice experience, but as explained by Jill Steinberg, a partner in Arent Fox's New York office (and another Hunter gal—go Hunter!), it sets the stage for developing great relationships and what every firm covets, creating and retaining clients.

Ms. Steinberg attributes a great deal of

her success to “good client relationships borne out of years of hard work.” She emphasizes that these relationships don’t happen immediately and grow organically over time. In describing one client relationship, Ms. Steinberg recalls that it started with someone with whom she had worked several years earlier in her career who had remembered the quality of her work and contacted her to work on additional projects.

Notice the holistic effect: solid work leads to greater practice experience; greater practice experience leads to more challenging assignments; more challenging assignments provide the platform for developing long-term relationships; long-term relationships can lead to client development.

But it doesn’t stop there. Those women attorneys who make a conscientious effort to create good work tend to be noticed by senior associates and partners who are then more likely to take an interest in their professional development. And that’s when and where the all important mentors step in.

Again, from a practical standpoint, how do you know when you have a good mentor?

“A good mentor is someone who has something valuable to teach you in a way that is useful to you and authentic,” explains Ghillaine Reid, a director in Gibbons’ New York office. Ms. Reid further emphasizes that “your mentor is someone who knows you: knows your strengths, your weaknesses and knows that you are worth mentoring.” The overwhelming consensus is that most attorneys will have multiple mentors as there is no such thing as a “one-size fit all” mentor.

Further, Ms. High warns that it is a mistake to limit mentors to those who look like you. In the legal profession it is vitally important to have mentors of both genders: men and women.

Ms. Steinberg agrees: “Your choice of mentors will not necessarily follow who you think they will be.” And while Ms. Steinberg has been mentored by

exceptional women, she also acknowledges and greatly appreciates the significant importance of her male mentors who have played critical roles in her professional development.

The lesson here is that great mentors are essential and male mentors have and will continue to play a critical role in the development of women attorneys (and, vice versa). As we move forward to maximizing the platform of the 21st century woman lawyer, we don’t want to adopt an “us versus them” approach. Rather, collaboration and mutual professional success between attorneys of both genders must be the mantra going forward.

Family and Work-Life Balance

What about family obligations? As Ms. Reid succinctly states, “In private practice, you are selling your expertise coupled with your time; any drain on your time is something that you need to juggle carefully.”

Ms. Reid is right. Whatever your family obligations or non-practice time commitments may be, it’s important to understand from the outset that any use of your time will impact your private practice.

For Ms. Steinberg, her family makes her a better, happier person but it doesn’t mean that the work-life balance comes with ease. For her, the combination of a very supportive husband and a law firm recognized for having a strong commitment to work-life balance is extremely helpful. And as Ms. High recognizes, “Most law firms recognize that they need to provide balance” and “that to be a good lawyer you sometimes need to take some time away from lawyering.”

As women attorneys, whatever your work-life balance issue may be, it’s imperative that our internal dialogue represent true respect for the personal choices that women attorneys make both as to career and family. As we move forward, we shouldn’t let our personal choices divide us but rather they should

serve as a unifying force.

And, for the law students and junior attorneys trying to figure it all out, understand that particularly in this economic climate, your goal is to “increase how valuable you can be to partners and clients,” says Ms. Reid. Law firms have placed a greater emphasis on value because clients seek increased efficiency.

As a new law school graduate, it’s difficult to add value early on in the process. Focus on ways to develop marketing and business opportunities at an early stage in your career.

“Be mindful that people are really relying on you,” suggests Ms. High. Each step of the way, an essential goal is to make the lives of senior associates, partners and clients a bit easier by turning in a quality work product.

And, let’s not forget the importance of personal satisfaction. Ms. Steinberg advises that women law students and junior women attorneys should “evaluate what is important and become very self aware of what makes them happy.”

Women attorneys have clearly made significant gains and all practitioners, irrespective of gender, should recognize that our ongoing inclusion is fundamental to the quality and advancement of the legal profession. We’re moving full force ahead.

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1. <http://www.america.gov/st/usg-english/2010/October/20101004165235eiznekc0.6292993.html>.

2. <http://www.law.yale.edu/admissions/profile.htm>; <http://www.law.nyu.edu/admissions/jd/admissions/applicants/classprofile/index.htm>; <http://www.law.harvard.edu/prospective/jd/apply/classprofile.html>.

3. http://www.nycbar.org/Diversity/pdf/Final_Benchmarking_Report.pdf.

4. <http://www.duhaime.org/LawMuseum/LawArticle-418/Mansfield-Belle-1846-1911.aspx>.

5. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandra_Day_O'Connor.