

How Firms Can Help Female Partners Make It Rain

By **Chelsea Naso**

Law360, New York (April 21, 2014, 7:37 PM ET) -- Female attorneys continue to find it daunting to rise and become rainmakers at law firms, but specialized leadership training and business development programs can help open doors.

While law schools graduate an almost equal number of men and women, Law360's Glass Ceiling Report found that there are significantly more men than women in the partnership ranks and management roles at U.S.-based law firms. Among the nearly 380 private practice firms surveyed, 33 percent of attorneys are women, with 21 percent ranking as partners and 16 percent as equity partners, the report found.

A number of firms are taking this issue head-on, working to move the needle by implementing new and improved women's initiatives that focus on embracing and strengthening the business development and leadership skills of their female associates and junior partners, while addressing topics like work-life balance and maternity planning, explained Stefanie Fogel, a DLA Piper partner who helped create and co-chairs the firm's Leadership Alliance For Women.

"We can help retain women by embracing them. I think women tend to leave because they are not as invested in the law firm culture as they are invested in other things," Fogel said. "By reaching out to women and embracing them and giving them the assurance that they are a crucial part of the team and that they can practice law and still have a vested interest outside the firm, they are more willing to stand tall and grow on that foundation."

Strengthen Leadership Skills

Developing and growing women's leadership skills are essential to helping them move up the ranks of a firm, which is why programs like DLA Piper's Leadership Alliance For Women are key to guiding women into leadership roles, explained Fogel. The program serves as an umbrella for a number of seminars, events and mentorships, with the goal of retaining, developing and advancing female attorneys at the firm, where 18.05 percent of partners are female.

The theory is, Fogel explained, if more senior, female partners mentor female associates and junior partners, hear them discuss issues at seminars or chat with them at events, the younger generation of lawyers will have a more clear picture of what it means to be both a leader and a female in the legal industry.

“It really is the issue of the mirror. If you cannot see yourself in the future in leadership, its challenging to envision how you can get there,” Fogel said.

The Leadership Alliance For Women dove even deeper in into strengthening women’s individual leadership styles with the launch of Women’s Emerging Leadership Program, explained Jacqueline Hodes, the DLA Piper partner who created WEL.

Two of the main components of WEL, which is in its first year, is developing leadership skills that give women the tools and the confidence to stand out within the firm and nailing down an individual business development plan. Depending on the woman’s individual skill set, that might mean publishing articles, public speaking opportunities or attending networking events to take the lead on creating a stronger role within the firm and a stronger book of business.

“As women progress through their career, they realize they mastered all the substance, but there’s something lacking to get to the next level,” Hodes said.

Faegre Baker Daniels LLP, where 25.27 percent of partners are female, takes a similar approach to addressing women’s leadership and business development through its Women’s Forum For Achievement, explained partners Peggy Abram and Shaun Clifford, co-chair of the program.

The firm’s women’s initiative puts on programs and seminars that serve not only to instill leadership qualities in its female attorneys, but also stirs conversations over the role of women in the legal industry, explained Abram. This is particularly true of its “Ready Set Lead” series, which is a rapid-fire question-and-answer session with firm leaders, male and female, about what it takes to stand out in the legal industry, and of its extensive online resources, Clifford explained.

“With the Women’s Forum for Achievement, we create another space where people can get what they need. From our programs other questions are raised and other conversations occur. I think that’s where the real value is: raising awareness about certain topics that impact women and their business development,” Clifford said.

Embrace Individual Style

More and more, the legal industry is embracing the notion that leadership, networking and client relationship building are not one-size-fits-all, making it essential to guide female attorneys through the process of self-branding and self-marketing, explained Sandra Jeskie, a Duane Morris LLP partner who chairs the firm’s women’s initiative. Gone are the days of talking like, acting like and pretending to be a man, she said.

“Women just do things a little differently when it comes to business development. They are already very successful lawyers and our programs are designed to capitalize on their existing talents” Jeskie said.

Duane Morris, where 22.54 percent of partners are female, is in its third year of running its yearlong Springboard To Success program, which drills down on skills including creating a unique business and marketing plan development and personal branding through the use of in-house workshops, outside consultants and open communication with the firm’s management, Jeskie explained.

“The women who participated in the program are already successful, and the program is designed to bring their practice to the next level,” she said.

Linda Hollinshead, a partner at Duane Morris who is participating in Springboard, found that the program is making her to focus on building a strong personal brand, deep client relationships and the skills she needed to broaden her book of business during a key turning point in her career.

“This program recognizes that its extremely important to have the conversation about women and developing leadership roles within the firm and then identify ways in which we can focus on those goals,” Hollinshead said. “It gives you the opportunity to focus on growing relationships and self-marketing and reminds you how valuable that is to your practice and to the firm.”

Don't Exclude Male Leadership

Strengthening leadership skills and honing individual marketing, networking and business development skills are of little help if the male leadership at the firm does not join the conversation. Vinson & Elkins LLP, where 17.54 percent of partners are female, found that after several years of having a standard, run-of-the-mill women’s initiative, it was not having the desired effect, explained Mark Kelly, a partner and the firm’s chairman.

“We’ve recognized, and it’s not unique to our industry, that even with all of the efforts and focus we’ve had over the years we really haven’t moved the needle as much as we’d like, so we’ve revamped what we do here,” he said.

That revamping included stepping beyond a council and in-house programming to fine-tuning a way to regularly examine the process of its female attorneys by adding a layer of supervision by the firm’s leaders, said Kelly and Scott Wulfe, the firm’s managing partner.

By meeting on a quarterly basis with the head of each practice group, Kelly and Wulfe are able to question the performance of attorneys and find out if the female attorneys are getting the same opportunities to connect with high-level clients. Perhaps most importantly, Kelly explained, they are able to emphasize that identify ways to retain and develop strong female attorneys is important to them, and should be considered important to the practice group leader.

"We felt like the managing partner and the chairman had to set the tone at the top so people will recognize its importance," he said. "Rather than just pay lip service to it, we visit individually with the practice group leaders on a quarterly basis, and we go through various statistical information to determine what areas need particular focus so that we know where to concentrate our efforts."

Fix Your ‘Leaky Pipeline’

The legal industry has become known as somewhat of a “leaky pipeline,” as women drop out of the legal industry a couple years into their careers because of outside challenges, such as the decision to start a family, explained Cooley LLP's Carrie Wagner, who serves as the firm’s director of attorney recruiting and diversity programs.

“The legal profession has been referred to as a ‘leaky pipeline’ for women, as the percentage of women partners in firms is significantly smaller than the percentage of women joining those same firms out of law school. Finding successful ways to address that issue is important to us,” Wagner said.

Business development programs and women’s initiatives that focus on planning around the desire to

start a family can be helpful in retaining strong female attorneys who might otherwise be lost in the mix during or after a maternity leave, Wagner explained.

At Cooley, where 20.45 percent of partners are female, the firm has created a liaison program to help attorneys deal with long leaves of absences through increased communications, explained Wagner. This can be particularly helpful for women taking maternity leave, so they do not feel cut off from the firm. Cooley also offers flex time, allowing women to end their maternity leave and slowly work back into a full schedule as they learn to find their own personal work-life balance, Wagner explained.

“The goal is to provide support leading up to the leave, remain in contact with the attorney while they are away from the office, and help them to reacclimate upon their return,” she said. “It can be difficult for an attorney to be away from the firm for an extended period of time, and even more so for them to pick up where they left off when they return. We believe this program provides the support necessary to make this an easier transition.”

Regardless of the programs that are or are not available, however, some women will make the decision to take a break from working in the legal industry. This makes it important for firms to have a point of re-entry after leaving law behind, Wagner said.

Cooley is one of four law firms piloting an initiative known as “OnRamp,” a one-year fellowship program created by lawyer recruitment, development and diversity specialist Caren Ulrich Stacy. The fellowship, Wagner explains, gives female attorneys who left to have or adopt children, or for any other reason, a way to step back into the legal industry and replenish that so-called leaky pipeline.

“This program provides women who have taken a hiatus from the practice of law an opportunity to get their feet back into practice in a meaningful way” Wagner said. “At the same time, it provides the participating firms with an opportunity to evaluate an attorney’s skill set and experience level through a year-long fellowship, prior to potentially hiring her on as an associate.”

--Editing by Richard McVay.