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### **CHANGING LAW FIRM METRICS THROUGH A WOMEN'S INITIATIVE**

Her voice was filled with excitement, a welcome change from the frustrated tone she often had when she spoke of her law firm workplace. "I was asked to create a Women's Initiative at the firm," she explained. "After years of ignoring these issues, the firm is finally starting to move forward!"

It was difficult to match her enthusiasm, without knowing the answers to the difficult questions which would go to the heart of her firm's commitment to her success: "What resources are they providing you? Who from the firm's senior management team will be involved? Is there a strong committee to work with you on this effort? And what are they specifically asking you to accomplish in this role?" When her answers indicated that she had no resources, no senior management involvement, no dedicated committee and no specific goals or objectives, the proverbial handwriting was on the wall. It was no surprise, therefore, to learn that some time later she had left the firm in frustration and accepted a new position elsewhere.

Law firms are now recognizing that after decades of losing talented lawyers, the failure to retain and advance women in the legal profession must be addressed. Even if the increasingly high costs of attrition are not sufficiently compelling reasons to focus on these issues, the competition for talent makes it a business imperative.

Many firms are responding by creating Women's Initiatives. A well-designed Initiative can indeed help a firm make meaningful progress. If not carefully created, however, these efforts will, at best, be an opportunity for women to work on projects together and, at worst, a waste of valuable time and energy that causes friction and divisiveness.

At its essence, a Women's Initiative is about crafting a framework to identify and rectify impediments to success. It is likely to involve a focus on both removing internal barriers that exist within the firm and providing external opportunities that, among other things, can serve as helpful tools for building a practice. Even as Women's Initiatives range tremendously in scope, focus, and sophistication, they all should offer skill-building and related training opportunities, assistance in developing business networks, a safe environment for women to discuss issues of concern, and a strong internal management support system for addressing these issues. And even as these Initiatives are often initiated by the energy and involvement of a firm's female lawyers, clear and visible senior management involvement is an important element of success.

From its inception, a Women's Initiative should be the product of significant input. This means understanding the firm's internal culture and identifying the unique factors in the firm that may contribute to the relatively low percentage of female partners. Most lawyers resist an assessment process: "We know what our problems are. We just want to get right to the stage where we can fix them," is the frequently heard lament. But the knowledge to be gained from an internal assessment is critical, offering firm-specific insight and information upon which to design a plan of action.

Once an assessment has been completed, the Initiative's leadership must go about the hard work of prioritizing its goals. Whatever shape that process takes, it is important to always remain focused on the key underlying purpose of the Initiative: to provide greater opportunities for advancement and leadership for women attorneys at the firm. That includes maximizing the involvement of women attorneys throughout the firm, seeking to break down possible resistance to the effort. Women attorneys may occasionally express a degree of discomfort with the idea of meeting "separately," concerned with how this may be viewed by their male colleagues. As those who have been involved with the implementation of successful Initiatives know, however, as long as women constitute small minorities of equity partnership and leadership positions, there is a need to implement programs and policies that will lead to improved firm metrics and greater opportunities for success.

But it is not enough to reassure male colleagues that a Women's Initiative is important. Men must become partners in creating the template for future success. The fact is, a Women's Initiative is, at its core, focused on creating the institutional changes needed to create a firm environment which will foster success. Accordingly, men must be active participants at the table, in light of their predominance in the law firm management structure. Senior law firm leaders have a critical role to play in first, understanding the subtle ways in which unexamined biases thwart the success of women lawyers; and, second, ensuring the needed management support, accountability structures, and resources to ensure change. Their role as participants in a Women's Initiative, therefore, is critical.

Once the foundation for the Women's Initiative has been established, it is typical to develop a variety of programming options, including speakers and training to meet the goals and objectives identified through the assessment process. Firm-wide training programs may include a focus on diversity, respectful workplace issues, and a gender-equal evaluation process.

In addition, successful Women's Initiatives generally feature speakers of interest to meet with the women attorneys on a variety of topics ranging from, for example, client development, media relations, negotiation skills, and gender issues in the courts, to such issues as dressing for success. Another key programming area includes workshops focused on career navigation skills. These programs provide important tools to help women lawyers focus both internally and externally on building important career-development skills.

Other programming components of a Women's Initiative include events and seminars devoted to business development and related networking opportunities. These range in scope from panel discussions which can be open to clients and business contacts, to retreats, or even "spa days" for key women clients.

In establishing a Women's Initiative, however, it is essential to resist efforts to "measure" its success simply by tracking new clients or new business directly attributable to these efforts. This is a false measurement and would only undermine the reason for

creating such an Initiative in the first place – which is, to assist the firm’s efforts to retain and promote women attorneys.

Rather, the appropriate measure of a successful Women’s Initiative is the rate of increase in women attorneys retained, as well as the rate of increase of women elevated to partnership and firm leadership positions. The purpose of a Women’s Initiative, therefore, is to focus on ways women can succeed in the firm. Accordingly, even though management support is a crucial component, it is women who must drive the agenda and identify the measures of success.

In writing about gender-based differences in behavior, author Deborah Blum observed the positive impacts of women helping other women in the workplace: “The most heartening part of seeing women rise in the power structure is not seeing them perform like powerful men, but like powerful women.” She noted that as women’s voices have been heard in the workplace, the result has been an increased emphasis on day care, flexible schedules, and the importance of addressing work-family issues.

In other words, critical mass matters. Toward that goal, women are becoming effective at joining forces to accelerate a change in law firm demographics. By forming bonds and working together internally, and by working with male colleagues who understand the mutual benefits that derive from a successfully implemented effort, women lawyers can lead the way to an environment conducive to the success of all lawyers.

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