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On February 9 at the Physicians and Hospitals Law Institute in Austin, TX, the Women’s Leadership Council (WLC) hosted a networking breakfast panel discussion attended by approximately 50 AHLA members. The breakfast was sponsored by ECG Management Consultants.

The panel discussion, moderated by Vicki Vandaveer, an organizational behavior psychologist, focused on the important role that professional relationships play in a lawyer’s career success – especially for women. Whatever a woman lawyer’s aspirations may be (e.g. equity partnership in a large law firm, general counsel of a large health system or corporation, equal compensation or billing rate equity, C-suite access, assignments with key clients, a position on a key firm or corporate committee, a fair share of origination credit or a bigger legal budget), having effective professional relationships is key to helping her get there. While the same is true for men, the strategies, tactics and styles that are effective are very different for women than they are for men.

National data continue to show that there are still far fewer women partners than male partners in large law firms. In one study (National Law Journal (NLJ), 2012) women represented only 15.1 percent of all equity partners and 18.8 percent of all partners (equity and non-equity) at top NLJ firms. Another study (National Association of Women Lawyers (NAWL), 2014), showed that only 17 percent of equity partners at the top 200 grossing U.S. law firms were women, and women attorneys’ compensation and billing rates fall short of those of their male counterparts.

While we could find no causal analyses to explain the disparity between men and women’s attainment of equity partnership, top organizational roles, compensation and billing rates, hypotheses offered (but not tested) include (a) perhaps women leave the law firm and corporate ranks because they have other professional and personal goals; (b) they may leave because they have little faith that they will be successful in their organizations due to significant barriers and obstacles, (c) perceptions and assumptions by those in power that women are okay with less pay and advancement because they don’t ask for more or (d) perhaps because they prefer the flexibility to take maternity and parenting leave when they want.

The panel focused on three key areas:
1. Mentors and Sponsors – Who Are They and How Can They Help Women Achieve their Goals?
Mentors educate and advise. A sponsor is someone who has power and is willing to pull you forward. It can be very helpful to identify and seek out sponsors, both within and external to your firm/organization, to help advance your career. Panelists shared experiences about key people who gave them opportunities. Several found sponsors within AHLA who helped them gain access to opportunities to advance within the association, which in turn raised their visibility and recognition within their firm or organization.

2. Other Key Relationships – and Strategies for Building and Maintaining
Important other relationships to build and maintain include:

❯❯ In a law firm: the Managing Partner and Practice Group Chair(s), “rainmakers” at all levels, “connectors” (i.e, those people who are particularly effective networkers who will help connect you), secretaries/administrative assistants (wealth of information), and, importantly, each other – women helping women – and helping male colleagues as well (read on for rationale).

❯❯ In a corporation or large health care institution: CEO, GC and/or other C-suite and department executives, secretaries/administrative assistants, the company’s outside counsel, high potential employees who may be “connectors.”

Some effective relationship building strategies shared and suggested by panel members included:

❯❯ Forge relationships with people in powerful roles (e.g., managing partner; senior executive). That paid off for one panelist when that person later championed her cause when the time came to make partner.

❯❯ Find ways to ensure that a managing partner or other key player knows about your successes and accomplishments (help to keep you at top of mind at the right moments).

❯❯ Be consistently positive! Research shows that this is very important for achieving your career goals, as well as building and maintaining effective client relationships. Positivity is in some ways counter to legal training, where analytical skills and discerning “what might go wrong” are emphasized (can be viewed as negative). It is important for women to take the next step to ask themselves “OK – what can we do to achieve the client’s objectives?” Instead of “can’t do,” focus on “how to do...”. (This is important for men, too, but even more important for women.)

It was acknowledged that many women are often not comfortable with self-promotion, and if not an extravert, attempts at self-promotion appear awkward (e.g. boldly approaching a powerful person and relaying your achievements). Above all, women must be authentic. That means finding the strategies that match your natural style. One easy strategy is to find a colleague who may be willing to mention your latest achievements to the right people. Another softer approach might be to say to a powerful person how much you’ve appreciated working on an important project associated with that person’s vision and strategic priorities, which may lead them to ask you more about your role in the project. Another approach is to showcase the team’s successes.

While important to be authentic, it is also often necessary to push yourself outside your comfort zone and to be direct when necessary. Panelists’ advice is, “don’t be afraid to ask someone to have lunch or meet with you.” Women in particular need to remember that those who ask (e.g., for compensation increases) are usually those who receive. However, women need to be mindful about the manner in which they ask since aggressiveness in a woman is often viewed negatively, as it is inconsistent with “gender role expectations” (see below).

3. Relationship With Self and Being Authentic
Finding your own style and approach that are consistent with your authentic self is important to success. This entails (a) assessing your strengths/natural talents, motivational drivers, interests, personality characteristics and desired lifestyle; (b) focusing honestly on what career goals best fit your skill, motivational and interest profile; (c) then taking steps to move in that direction. It can be very helpful to have a skilled and supportive sounding
board, such as a professional coach or a good friend outside your organization, who will listen and give you honest feedback. Women in our society are not generally socialized to focus on power, as men usually are. Many women are uncomfortable with – and many do not recognize – their own power. This, in addition to a number of other factors, lead to women not asking for what they want . . . which leads to the men in power assuming they don’t want those things because they are not asking.

A metaphoric visual that may be helpful: A strong, muscular man and his petite wife who had strong legs but less strong arms loved to kayak river rapids. He says that his wife is far more skilled than he at “eskimo-rolling” the kayak (that is, rolling it over as is sometimes necessary in rapids). He powers the kayak over and has, as a result, dislocated his shoulder on more than one occasion; while his wife much more easily rolls it over by using finesse, not arm muscle strength. That is, she knows exactly how to maneuver her legs and body and exactly how to position and work the double-bladed oar. That is a powerful analogy for women in law and business. Brute force, aggressiveness, pushiness, direct competitiveness, etc. do not work for us. We need to be masterfully skilled at using finesse in our relationships – using, in fact, what many women naturally have. So rather than deny or repress our attributes of warmth, caring, intuition supporting/nurturing, we need to bring those out into the sun and work to hone them along with our legal/professional/management skills. (Hence, the suggestion above regarding also helping male colleagues achieve their goals.)

Conclusion: Whatever your career goals may be, relational skills are key. While having strong relational skills is important for both men and women, they may be even more important for women due to gender role expectations and associated assumptions – i.e., prevailing stereotypes in our culture that women are (should be) more warm, caring, intuitive and empathetic than men. Spending some time and effort honing these skills – in addition to continually honing your legal skills – as you progress in your career will pay off more than you might think relative to your desired career outcomes! 

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