

Role Models I Have Known – And Why They Are Vital

Karen Turner McWilliams • DLA Piper

Every recruiting committee member can name a woman lawyer who went to the “right” law school, was on law review, had all the right credentials, and within three years has crashed and burned. Why does this happen?

Lack of Role Models to Blame

While there are various contributing factors to the fate of the female attorney, lack of access to key relationships is chiefly to blame. Over half of the female attorneys practicing in law firms point to the lack of mentoring opportunities as a barrier to their advancement. Similarly, over half cite exclusion from informal networks, and nearly half blame lack of role models as top barriers to promotion within law firms. Thus, the availability of appropriate role models is a necessity to retaining and advancing women and diverse lawyers in firms.

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Why are Role Models Important?

An available role model gives a lawyer someone to emulate. She is where you want to be and is willing to help you get there. She has attained a particular status and is able to share with you the recipe to her success in all aspects of her life. She is an example. She causes you to think that “if she can do it, I can do it.” A role model acts as a coach. She keeps you on track and makes sure that you accomplish your goals rather than just continually running from emergency to emergency putting out fires.

Role models help lawyers navigate the political landscape of their practice group. They provide impromptu training, share war stories and lessons learned. Role models help lawyers cope with the inevitable failures by providing seasoned insight.

A role model taught me that you’re not a real trial attorney if you’ve never lost a case. Another emphasized that our profession is called the “practice” of law because we’re not perfect.

Mentors can also help you cope with the stuff life throws your way when you’re not practicing law. They can help you resolve nagging personal issues, which, in turn, allows you to focus on your work product. For example, role models have told me it was okay to wear pants to court, to get an au pair

when I had my second child and to delegate grocery shopping to a delivery service. One colleague mentor encouraged me in the ladies room simply by telling me that it was okay to feel overwhelmed when first returning from maternity leave. I relived that moment four years later when an associate came to my office feeling the same way. Role models like ABA Board member Pauline Schneider and Richmond legal legend Jackie Stone provide motivation, encouragement and inspiration by opening doors, blazing trails, breaking down barriers and inspiring passion for the profession.

How to Find Role Models

To find role models, look for lawyers with personalities and work habits compatible to yours. Those lawyers should have time to listen to your questions and concerns. Your role models do not have to look like you. As a mother and the only African-American associate in the firm’s McLean, Virginia office, my role model was a white male partner named Lou Michels. Lou and I were in the same practice group and our offices were in close proximity. He was a devoted father and a successful lawyer. He provided me speaking opportunities, demonstrated marketing skills and through his example I learned how to maintain a fitness regimen and be involved in the rearing of my children. When I left that firm, my role model became another partner, Harriet Lipkin, who, like me, is married to a lawyer and the mother of two.

Mentors are not always found in your firm, but they abound. To find a good role model ask judges, lawyers in other firms, bar association leaders, members of Inns of Court, executives and leaders in the church, synagogue or mosque for a reference. You’ll be surprised how many of them will give of their time, or, if they cannot, how eager they are to connect you with others who are like-minded.

I have benefited from the wise counsel of judges, partners, general counsels and attorney generals. One of my long-standing mentors, Judge Gerald Bruce Lee, of the Eastern District of Virginia, is fond of saying: “to whom much is given much is required.” Another mentor says: “There is a special place in hell for women who fail to help others succeed.” This sentiment encourages me to mentor women and diverse attorneys despite the challenges faced.

Lack of Inclusion A Culprit

Lack of inclusion is another contributor to the failure of

law firms to retain diverse lawyers. According to a recent American Bar Association study, law firms are losing incredible talent by failing to integrate women, particularly women of color. That same study, *Women of Color in Law Firms*,² August 2006, ABA Journal, confirms that minorities suffer disproportionately from fear and isolation within the law firm setting. Consequently, access and exposure to informal networks is just as important as mentoring if a firm desires to promote and retain women and diverse lawyers.

Volunteering to serve on a firm committee will guarantee you regular access to firm management and practice group leadership.

How to Belong

To gain exposure to these informal networks, one must be invited regardless of race or gender. This is not the mandatory bar. To “belong,” you cannot simply pass a test, fill out a membership application and pay dues. You must fit in and fit in well. The influential lawyers in your firm are at the office early or they stay late because they are meeting with clients during the business day. Alter your arrival or departure times to coincide with theirs. Befriend their assistant and you’ll gain access to their calendar. Make sure you are around when she is expected in. I have staked out partners’ offices to get their attention. Once you get close enough to the chairman to get noticed, relax and be interesting. Be yourself.

The successful rainmakers participate in charity events and attend client receptions; they are bar association leaders and participate in sports. Respond to those last minute firm emails sent the evening of an event begging attorneys to help round out a firm sponsorship table. This is why, despite the business casual culture, it is important to keep a suit and heels at the

office. I have never fared very well at softball, but I make a good cheerleader, and as an associate I played on the firm’s softball team. I do not golf, but I have learned to drive the cart and enjoy the conversation. The relationships established over sports and the happy hours that follow are long-lasting.

Find opportunities to meet the firm’s movers and shakers at the gym, at lunch, on a coffee or cigarette break. I have suffered cigar and cigarette smoke to gain access to information. Seek out opportunities to travel with firm leadership or accompany them to court, to a meeting or a reception. As a summer associate, I drove an eighth-year associate to court so that she could argue against an emergency motion filed by a pro se litigant. The car ride to the court was tense since I was forced to drive her car while she studied the cases. However, the ride back to the office and the detour we took to grab a bite to eat was worth all the stress of trying to parallel park her Cadillac in Old Town Alexandria. Volunteering to serve on a firm committee will guarantee you regular access to firm management and practice group leadership, which is nearly exclusively male.

Your best advocate is oftentimes a male serving a leadership and influencing role at the firm. For me, it was Peter Pantaleo, who at the time was the practice group leader and on the executive committee of the firm. He told me that to get men involved in your advancement, one must be direct. Men prefer it. This was against my southern upbringing – and remains a challenge – but I persist. Tell the office managing partner that you want him to introduce you to the relationship partner for a large firm client. Invite your practice group leader to coffee and tell him that you want to pitch a particular client. Remind him that he inspires client confidence in your abilities through his praise. Tell him that you want to make partner, ask him how you can attain this goal and if he will serve on your personal board of directors to ensure your success. These strategies have helped me persevere in my 14 years as a law firm attorney and my six years as a partner. I hope they are useful to you. •

We stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. We provide shoulders for those who follow us.

Announcing the NAWL Student Mentorship Program

Operating on a national level, the program will pair experienced lawyers from NAWL membership with law students eager to learn from them.

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