

CORPORATE COUNSEL

Tactics for Shattering the Glass Ceiling and Building the Next Generation of Glass Breakers

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By **Kim Stuart** | April 23, 2018 at 11:40 AM



Leadership is defined as “The ability of an individual to ‘lead’ or guide other individuals, teams or entire organizations ... A process of social influence in which a person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task or goal.” —Oxford English Dictionary

A simple concept, but not easy to obtain; and not a position that comes to people equally. While good leaders have some similar traits, leadership styles may differ as does situational interactions, functions, behaviors, vision, values, charisma and intelligence. Leadership disparities exist in almost every industry and sector, and the legal industry is no exception. According to the National Association of Women Lawyers’ (NAWL)s Annual Survey Report, women currently make up 19 percent of equity partners and 25 percent of firm governance roles. So what more can be done to break the glass ceiling? To move that ever-elusive needle?

After spending a couple days with industry thought-leaders and talented women leaders from law firms around the country at the Women Leaders Forum, we sensed a culture shift, in part because of the current #MeToo movement. We talked a great deal about leadership—what you need to be good at it, the paths to it, the behaviors, the interactions, the strategies and tactics, etc. We discussed the percentages of women and diverse lawyers in leadership roles, as well

as implicit bias and what is holding people and organizations back from having balanced seats at the table.

Here are five key takeaways from the Women Leaders Forum to break the glass ceiling:

- **Self-advocate.** Women are less likely to seek advancement, ask for raises and are routinely prone to self-doubt, dwelling on mistakes and perfectionism. And yet, as women, we own our careers. So, own it. Seek opportunities both inside and outside the firm. Internally, look for ways to add value and ask for roles, positions or projects. If denied, be persistent, provide real, measurable value and then ask again. Externally, look for service openings in other business, community or civic areas. Becoming a leader outside your firm allows people to see what you can do inside the firm, and gives you additional networking and business development opportunities. If there are any misperceptions about your abilities, having other leadership experience changes those—barriers dissolve and credibility transfers. Focus on an opportunity, promote your abilities and go after it.
- **Be part of the solution.** Problems start and stew when we are not constantly adapting and evolving with our clients' and our organizations' needs, and they get worse when we reward ineffective and inefficient behaviors instead of solution-based behaviors. In leadership or on the rise to leadership, it is imperative to focus on process improvements, to manage expectations and commitments, to calibrate drive and innovate.

Collaboration and transformative ideas are critical when it comes to process and innovation, whether with compensation structures, project management, specific client matters or team/practice/industry leadership. Rewarding desirable behaviors supports growth, accountability and positive change, promotes an efficient culture and ultimately improves revenue generation. Whatever project or initiative, come to the table with solution-based ideas and help incentivize team members who do the same.

- **Give feedback—to everyone, often.** Giving effective feedback is an art and an essential skillset for all leaders. Without it, conversations and interactions, and ultimately projects or matters, can go sideways and potentially fail. The team is there to support the organization. If employees don't feel part of the team or feel compelled to work with team members because they have few or unsupportive conversations, retaining talent will be a struggle at best. The importance of both constructive feedback and positive feedback works to support the company's foundation and motivate colleagues to be tied to the company, its members and its vision.

Clear, concise and well-timed feedback allows people to highlight behaviors and illustrate how those behaviors impact results. Be mindful to include a sense of encouragement and ask questions with "what," "how" and "why," then listen and offer ideas without making assumptions. Feedback inspires respect and growth; it not only supports the development of talent and cultivates a collaborative culture, but also interconnects people to one another and provides new opportunities for success and advancement.

- **Fail forward.** The ability to focus on winning and learning improves your mental strength. Continuous improvement in successful as well as failed situations supports self-awareness, resiliency and the ability to deal with unexpected outcomes, changes or

setbacks. One of our strengths is our experience. Our experience, and what we learn from it, is often what differentiates us from competitors, and something that should be leveraged. Women, who are typically more humble or less confident than men, can capitalize on failures and build on their strengths. Strengths like intuition, adaptability and the ability to reframe situations can propel you to self-awareness and an authenticity that draws people and keeps them interested.

Failure is an essential building block of real growth and experience and handling failure and adversity with poise comes from truly experiencing and analyzing it. So, learn, grow, improve, succeed, fail and repeat (not necessarily in that order).

- **Generate and be generous.** Often, without economic power, there is no leadership position. Business development and networking are key to a pipeline and a book of business. Focus on business development efficiently so that your contacts and connections with your network are consistent and meaningful. Generate an active pipeline and secure new work by being generous and thoughtful.

Take small steps frequently and follow up with your contacts in a way that adds value, makes their lives easier and connects them to someone or to something that is relevant to their needs. Be proactive, ask questions and show them that their activities mean something to you. Books of business equate to opportunity and advancement, so focus on it—religiously.

Put these takeaways into practice, go forth and lead. Continue shattering the ceiling, make sure the glass is broken, and once you get to the top, remember that a true leader uses that power to lift up the people around them, provide opportunities and hold themselves and others accountable.

“As a leader, it’s a major responsibility on your shoulders to practice the behavior you want others to follow.” —Himanshu Bhatia, Rose International Inc.

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