

Workplace Strategies

Band of Sisters

Better Together

By Kristen Dennison, Stephanie Holcombe, and Bridget Harris



Women in the legal profession experience a variety of environments in the workplace. At the 2020

Women in the Law Conference in sunny Scottsdale, Arizona, we led a panel to discuss how to move from toxic workplaces, where women knock each other down in competition, to a cooperative atmosphere, where women lean in together and collaborate in the workplace to lift as they rise. During this dialogue, we considered how generational differences can affect how women treat each other in the workplace. Through pointed questions and attendee contributions, the panel generated such a productive discussion we wanted to share it with all of DRI.

Competition

Q: How have you handled competition with women?

A: There are a variety of methods by which women handle competition with other women. Some women simply retreat within themselves and avoid confrontation and conflict. In some work environments, this may be noticed and appreciated as rising above the pettiness. Unfortunately, in many environments, this may lead to being overlooked for assignments and promotions. Other women address competition through leading by example, refusing to compete and instead showing cooperation with other women within their firms. But sometimes, if the environment is too toxic, it may be time to move on to a firm that promotes an environment of cooperation between women through the top levels that supports and promotes women at the highest level. Even if you can't find cooperation with women in the workplace, be sure to surround yourself with people outside of the workplace who will lift you up.



Q: Why do you think it's harder with women than men?

A: Traditionally, there have been fewer opportunities for women to rise to equity partner and management within their firms. As a result, some women may feel that, with limited spots, they have to rise at the expense of other women for those coveted opportunities. More and more firms are moving away from promoting that type of atmosphere. Clients are demanding that firms show diversity at the top levels. It is also easier for women to be more cooperative in those environments. Until the mold is broken across the legal profession, however, women may still face this type of competition, breaking other women down instead of lifting them up.

Q: What can we do to break the pattern of competition among women?

A: Women must lead by example. Women can mentor less experienced female colleagues and help them become better lawyers, better rainmakers, and better businesswomen. Women can push for "women in the law" groups within their firms to promote collegiality. Firms can help by making sure that women are provided opportunities to become equity partners and have

a seat at the management table.

Generations

Q: Do you see generational differences in how women treat each other in the workplace?

A: Yes, and these differences are especially prevalent among those born from 1944-1979 (Baby Boomer and Gen X generations) and those born between 1980 and 2015 (Millennial and Gen Z generations). Specifically, many women in the Baby Boomer and Gen X generations discussed that firm culture was drastically more competitive

among women decades ago due to the limited number of leadership positions for women in firms across the Nation. With a lack of seats at the table for women, women felt the need to compete with one another to obtain the very limited positions which they were seeking. Now, according to women in the Millennial and Gen Z generations, women are seeing a positive shift in the level of competitiveness among women in the workplace. While competition is still there, a healthy competitive shift has taken place causing women to be the best they can be inside the four walls of their firms and elsewhere. For example, Melody Eagan, who is Lightfoot, Franklin & White, LLC's current managing partner, is the first woman to lead the firm in its history. Lightfoot's WOLF Pack (Women Of Lightfoot Franklin) is supportive of Melody and appreciative of her strong leadership. Women supporting women is a common theme in today's times, and will continue to be a common theme for years to come.

Q: Have you experienced differences as you have progressed through your career based on age?

A: Most certainly. A plethora of women expressed that the more seasoned one becomes, the more respect one receives in the courtroom from male counterparts and other attorneys in general. With age comes wisdom and with wisdom comes respect.

Q: What are some things you wish firms had implemented when you were climbing the partnership ranks that you could do for others?

A: While 51 percent of law school classes are women, only 19 percent of those women go on to make equity partner for a variety of reasons. It is safe to assume that one of those reasons is childbearing. Knowing this statistic, many women expressed their need for more realistic maternity leave programs, believe it or not. Attorneys in firm leadership positions should encourage management to implement maternity/paternity leave programs that benefit the next generation of hardworking attorneys choosing to have children. Many attorneys were enlightened and impressed that Lightfoot, Franklin & White, LLC implemented four months primary caretaker leave, formerly known as maternity leave, and two weeks non-primary caretaker leave, formerly known as paternity leave, in order to ensure that working mothers and fathers are receiving the support they need to work their way up through the partnership ranks. Many in the room were admirable of this time that a mother or father would now be able to spend with their child, knowing that their practice would be waiting for them upon their return to the firm.

Collaboration

Q: Where can you look to find your tribe?

A: Tribes come in different forms and can serve many different needs. You can find them based on personal similarities (e.g., working moms, similar age, similar hobbies, etc.) or you can find them based on career-related or project-related similarities (e.g., same class year, partnership, mentorship or sponsorship, etc.). The one thing all tribes share in common is the desire to support you when you are struggling, cheer you when you are winning, and encourage you when you are trying to accomplish your goals. The best place to look for a tribe is wherever you feel that sense of support, cheering, and encouragement. Those are going to be the people that keep you afloat when you feel like sinking, and they will be the people that are ready to celebrate you when you feel too modest to celebrate yourself.

Q: What are examples of positive outcomes that can happen when women work together with other women?

A: Gone should be the days where women feel that there is not enough room for all of us at the top of the corporate ladder. The time for unhealthy competition with other women should end. Instead, as women climb the corporate ladder, we should be reaching down and pulling up other women with us. That is the only way that real change in the workplace is going to happen. When women of all different races and sexual orientations work together, we can learn so much from each other's experiences, differences, struggles, and accomplishments. We can support each other and create new ways to overcome some of the struggles that working women face. We can help each other celebrate the strengths women have in the workplace and collaborate on better ways to utilize them to our advantage. Collaboration is key to helping women find ways to succeed. Susan B. Anthony stated it best: Wherever women gather together, failure is impossible!

Conclusion

This year's DRI Women in the Law *Band of Sisters: Better Together* program allowed us to present on very real issues concerning (1) competition in the workplace, (2) generational differences in workplace experiences, and (3) collaboration in the workplace. This program allowed women from all walks of life to encourage each other to be the best they can be in their respective careers and provided them with an opportunity to discuss solutions to specific problems that many women face while attempting to navigate a male dominated profession. Next year's

program will deliver more top-notch programs focused on issues specific to women in the legal profession. Come join us in 2021 near the Golden Gate Bridge. It's an event you do not want to miss!

Bridget Harris is an associate in Birmingham, Alabama, at Lightfoot Franklin & White, LLC who primarily practices in the areas of product liability, catastrophic injury, medical malpractice and commercial litigation. She advocates for her clients day-in and day-out, whether that be through mediation, arbitration, or court. Bridget received her J.D. from the University of Alabama School of Law, her B.A. cum laude from Georgia State University, and is a 2012 Alabama Teach For America alumna.

Stephanie Holcombe is a litigation partner at Porter Hedges LLP, a full-service law firm based in Houston, TX. She works with companies to manage business and employment disputes — from risk control and litigation avoidance to

the successful management of complex ongoing litigation in state and federal court. Stephanie is actively involved in legal organizations, including DRI and the Houston Bar Association, where she is chair-elect for the Litigation Section. For three consecutive years, Texas Super Lawyers has named Stephanie a "Texas Rising Star." She was recently selected as a role model for Women in the Fast Lane of STEAM.

Kristen Elizabeth Dennison is a partner at Littleton Park Joyce Ughetta & Kelly LLP in Radnor, Pennsylvania. Ms. Dennison is an experienced litigator, focusing her practice in product liability, torts, and commercial litigation on behalf of product manufacturers, utilities, and other companies in personal injury, death, contract, and property damage cases. Ms. Dennison has defended manufacturers of automobiles, industrial equipment, utilities, aviation components, pharmaceuticals, and medical devices. Prior to joining Littleton Park, Ms. Dennison was senior litigation counsel at CNH Industrial America LLC.

COVID-19

Conversations on Money and the Pandemic

By Bridget Grimes



First, I'd like to say that I hope every person reading this article is well, your family is healthy, and you are weathering this storm. These are difficult times and the uncertainty can be unnerving. That said, we are resilient and this community is awesome, supportive, and empowering. We will get to the other side of this, and be stronger, kinder, and wiser.

For the past few months, while the stock market declined and our lives changed on a daily basis from the fallout of the pandemic, financial security has been heavy on the minds of many. As a financial planner for women attorneys, I have had tens of conversations with clients and non-clients looking for reassurance that they will be financially okay. Some of the conversations I've had are shared below. I am hopeful that they address some of the financial questions you may have, so that you can take action yourself for your own financial security.

I've been furloughed. What do I do now?

Furlough means an income hit, so this client and I immediately took a good look at what options she had for income. As a result of the CARES Act, passed by the government to provide financial support needed due to the pandemic, unemployment will be supplemented by an additional \$600 per week that will last four months. Individuals can now qualify for this even if they are self-employed, or independent contractors.

This client and I also looked to see where she could conserve cash. We took a hard look at her monthly budget for places to cut. Mortgage deferral is now available for individuals who are unable to cover their mortgage payments, so this client reached out to her lender to request a deferral for six months. Student loan payments can now be deferred until September 30, 2020, and no interest will accrue during the deferral. For credit card debt or other loans (like car loans), individuals can reach out to the creditors to request help.