

Sponsorship of Attorneys

BY ANN CARESANI

In “Stone Soup: A Recipe for Implementing a Diversity and Inclusion Program in Any Law Office,” published in February’s *Bar Journal*, my Tucker Ellis colleague Sanford Watson discussed the first steps a law office can take toward achieving diversity and inclusion.

I would like to continue that dialogue, focusing on one aspect of this process: sponsorship of attorneys. A sponsorship may be the single most critical strategy for accelerating a woman’s career, as suggested by a Catalyst study, *Sponsoring Women to Success*. A sponsor is more than a mentor — a sponsor is a person with the clout and ability to open doors. A sponsor will not just provide advice, but will personally advocate for a cause, project or promotion on a protégé’s behalf.

During an interview about her book, *Forget Mentors, Find a Sponsor*, economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett stated that she was able to show with data that women are only half as likely as men to have a sponsor — “a senior champion at work who will basically take a bet on them, tap them on the shoulder, and really give them a shot at leadership.” Imagine how that statistic translates to the legal industry.

In “Women and the Trouble with Mentors,” an October 2011 *Washington Post* article, author Selena Rezvani discussed some of Hewlett’s prior writing. Hewlett had explained that the similarity among people is a significant factor in encouraging interaction, and that high-ranking men may be helping other men and shutting out women without even realizing it. Hewlett suggested that sponsorship often involves one-on-one time between an older highly placed man and younger female, which could look like an affair, and was causing some people to avoid sponsorships. As explained by Rezvani, the first challenge is how to make sponsor-protégé relationships open and transparent. The second challenge is how to imbed into the culture the expectation that those in position to be sponsors indeed fulfill that role — not just for the people who like them, but *especially* those who do not look like them.

As a former chair of the CMBA Women in Law Section, I have heard a recurring lament from many women that they believe their access to potential male clients and sponsors is blocked: that their male peers have the opportunity to develop relationships with high-ranking men through events like golf outings, whereas women typically are not invited and may not be comfortable even if they were invited. I have also heard the story of a woman attorney finally being invited to an event with a group of men, only to have them spend the entire time discussing sports — with not one of them noticing her uncomfortable silence. Of course, it’s easy to say these attorneys should speak up, take up golf, read up on sports, and take their careers into their own hands. We do give these attorneys Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* lecture, but there is more to this story.

The Loudest Duck

In *The Loudest Duck: Moving Beyond Diversity While Embracing Differences to Achieve Success at Work*, Laura Liswood talks about the elephant and the mouse. The elephant, being the dominant group, does not notice the mouse and speaks freely. Meanwhile, the mouse (the nondominant group) runs around watching the behavior of the elephant to avoid being crushed, and worrying about reactions to its speech. Liswood’s point is that to achieve diversity and inclusion, the elephant needs to notice the mouse.

I should probably explain the duck analogy. In the United States, “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.” In Japan, “the nail that sticks out gets hit on the head.” In China, “the loudest duck gets shot.” Liswood is explaining that that cultural upbringing also influences the extent to which a person speaks up, and the dominant group may need to reach out to encourage others to speak.

Liswood discusses a study she did years ago, where the dominant group believed the organization was a meritocracy, while the three nondominant groups believed otherwise. The dominant group consisted of well-intentioned people who were surprised by the results — which explains exactly why it was so important to do the study, rather than just assume everything was fine.

Guys Who Get It at Cardinal Health

Recently, the Institute for Women’s Leadership awarded Mike Kaufmann its “2014 Guys Who Get It Award.” Kaufmann was CEO of Cardinal Health’s \$80 billion Pharmaceutical segment prior to being named Cardinal Health’s CFO. He was the executive sponsor of Cardinal Health’s Women’s Initiative Network (WIN) when it won the 2012 Healthcare Businesswomen’s Association ACE award for corporate programs advancing women’s careers. It’s important to note here that both men and women are members of WIN. Kaufmann was quoted as explaining, “As part of the overall Cardinal Health diversity and inclusion strategy, our Women’s Initiative Network has meaningful impact on the development of our leaders. We know that focusing on women and diversity is not only the right thing to do but it is also the smart thing to do — for our customers, our communities and our business.”

He is delivering a powerful message: diversity is important to the success of the business, and executive management is devoting time and budget to this initiative.

Attorneys Who Get It

In an article titled *Men — The Key to Advancing Women*, Ida Abbott of Abbott Consulting LLC discusses the importance of sponsorship of women by men in the legal profession, and some of the barriers to such sponsorship. She asserts that to make progress, front line leaders throughout the firm should create plans to be held accountable for results. She encourages raising men’s awareness of the factors that may cause them to overlook or avoid women protégés, and providing tools and encouragement for men to sponsor women.

In January’s *Journal* we discussed a Women in Law event that I co-chaired, in the Fall of 2014, “Women in Law Making a Difference.” We received comments about the significant number of men who attended this event. This should not be surprising — the men and women who attended are among Northeast Ohio’s legal community’s Attorneys Who Get It, and we were very grateful for their involvement and sponsorship of these honorees.

Sponsorship Success at BB&T Bank's Legal Department

My colleague M. Patricia Oliver (Pat) mentioned to me that all her key sponsors were men, and she has felt compelled to return the sponsorship favor to both men and women. I asked Pat to share the story about her time as General Counsel at BB&T Bank, in North Carolina.

BB&T brought Pat in from a law firm because it did not have an internal candidate, and needed a major overhaul of its legal department. Pat conducted their first 360 review, in which the bank learned that their business people considered the department nonresponsive

and not a business partner, preferring to work with outside counsel. Pat discovered a lot of underestimated talent in the department. She spent the next several years coaching and sponsoring both men and women. She sold the business people on using the department, helping the department grow from being disenfranchised to being the preferred provider. Pat shared that she knew she had succeeded in her sponsorship mission when she identified three strong successor candidates as general counsel — all of whom had been at the bank before she started.

In closing, I am grateful to the men and women who have been my sponsors, and I

encourage others to consider whether they can do more to help sponsor both women and men attorneys. The Women in Law Section typically meets the first Wednesday of each month, and we cordially invite anyone to join us..



Ann Caresani is counsel at Tucker Ellis, LLP. She focuses her practice on the areas of ERISA, employee benefits and executive compensation. She has been a member of the CMBA since 1999. She can be reached at (216) 697-4788 or ann.caresani@tuckerellis.com