

Lessons Learned at The MPF Fall Symposium - Empowering Women in Law Firm Leadership

This webinar was a recap of lessons learned from the MPF Fall Symposium, “Empowering Women in Law Firm Leadership,” which was presented at the MPF Leadership Conference in Chicago at the beginning of October.

- **Panelist:**
 - [Elise Holtzman](#), Founder and President of [The Lawyer’s Edge](#)
- **Moderators:**
 - [John Remsen Jr.](#), President at [TheRemsenGroup](#), President and CEO at [Managing Partner Forum](#)
 - [Uri Gutfreund](#), Senior Vice President and Managing Principal at [Ames & Gough](#)

Key takeaways:

1. In the end, women’s initiatives are not about blaming other people—these initiatives are simply about raising awareness and noting what works and what doesn’t work for everyone’s benefit.
2. Mentorship and sponsorship, while different, are key components of retaining female talent at your law firm, in addition to business development opportunities and, most notably, flexibility.
3. The way that girls are socialized emphasizes perfection and deemphasizes a lot of the skills required for leadership in the modern law firm, and creates an obstacle that forces many women in law to underestimate their own ability to lead.
4. Workplace flexibility at its best is intentional, and allows everyone to best accomplish their work while also fulfilling all other obligations.

Retaining Talented Women at Your Law Firm

The representation of women in big law firms is often dismally low, sometimes around 27% or even lower. Interestingly, the webinar revealed that smaller law firms, especially those founded by women, tend to have a higher percentage of women equity partners. This discrepancy raises questions about the effectiveness of larger firms in retaining female talent.

Most attendees of the webinar and symposium agreed that flexible work arrangements are the most effective way to attract and retain women lawyers. This flexibility can range from remote work options to accommodating family needs like school carpooling. Elise Holtzman emphasized that sometimes, “we need people to show us what we’re capable of,” and that having women in leadership roles can serve as powerful examples. She also noted that the

ability to "call the shots, make money, and move up" through business development and coaching are highly valued.

Mentorship and sponsorship also play crucial roles but are often misunderstood. Mentors are usually more experienced colleagues who offer emotional support and guidance. They are outside of your reporting structure and can provide a shoulder to cry on or advice on navigating the firm's culture. On the other hand, sponsors are influential figures within the firm who can actively help advance your career by putting you in the path of opportunities.

John Remsen, Jr. pointed out that, "Sponsorship goes on even when you're not in the room," while Uri Gutfreund observed that smaller firms often excel in these areas compared to big law firms, offering a more personalized approach to mentorship and sponsorship.

The panel also explored how good Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives are not just buzzwords but should incorporate mentorship, sponsorship, and professional development. These elements are essential for creating an inclusive environment that supports the career growth of all employees, regardless of gender. Successful DEI initiatives are those that are integrated into the firm's overall strategy for talent retention and growth.

Socialization and Its Impact on Leadership

Elise's presentation at the symposium, titled "The Double-Edged Sword of Perfectionism," delved into the systemic barriers women face, particularly the impact of socialization. Inspired by Reshma Saujani's mantra to "teach girls bravery, not perfection," Elise highlighted the contrasting ways boys and girls are raised. Girls are often taught to strive for perfection: getting good grades, being polite, and not making waves. Boys, on the other hand, are encouraged to be brave, to speak up, and even to break the rules.

This perfectionism serves women well initially, earning them praise and opportunities. However, as they climb the career ladder, the skills required shift towards leadership, e.g. being willing to make mistakes, manage processes, and sometimes upset people. This is where the perfectionism that has been ingrained in them becomes a hindrance. It prevents women from taking the leap into leadership roles, even when they are more than qualified.

Uri mentioned that women can sometimes be overqualified but hesitant to step up, a sentiment Elise agreed with, emphasizing the need for current leaders to recognize this untapped talent.

The issue with perfectionism is that it doesn't allow room for growth in leadership skills. Women who have been socialized to be perfect often find it challenging to step out of their comfort zones and take risks. They may hold back, waiting for the "right time" or until they feel 100% ready, which can be detrimental when it comes to seizing leadership opportunities.

However, this is not a matter of right or wrong, but a reflection of societal norms. These are broad strokes and not universal truths. The key to overcoming these barriers lies in a holistic approach that combines mentorship and sponsorship with a culture that values initiative-taking over perfection. Firms that make it clear they are committed to the long-term development of their employees, irrespective of gender, can make a significant difference.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexible work arrangements mean different things to different people. In the past, options like remote work were not as prevalent as they are today. The key is treating employees like adults and allowing them to work in a manner that suits their individual needs. This could range from accommodating parents' carpooling schedules to providing options for remote work.

But work-life flexibility isn't just about parenting. While women often shoulder the majority of household responsibilities, the conversation is shifting as more men, particularly from younger generations, take on these roles. Firms need to recognize that flexibility benefits everyone and contributes to a more inclusive work environment.

John emphasized the need to "be intentional about flexibility," which extends far beyond just parental leave.

However, as more men take parental leave, they too are experiencing the "flexibility penalty," becoming concerned about the potential repercussions at the firm should they be seen to take too much time off work for attending to personal or family matters. This is a widespread issue, so managers should consider exploring the need for a cultural shift within firms to normalize flexible work arrangements for all genders and personal dynamics.

Uri pointed out that the firm's mindset towards flexibility can make or break its effectiveness. A knee-jerk reaction to someone wanting to take a step back could label them as uncommitted, affecting their career trajectory. In contrast, firms that understand the broader context and are willing to have open conversations about leave, compensation, and other arrangements are more likely to retain valuable talent for the long term.

Women's Initiatives

Women's initiatives can be highly effective, but according to Elise, they often fall short. The first step is defining the initiative's goals. What are you trying to accomplish? Do you want women to be more comfortable in the workplace? Are you looking to develop better leadership skills? Whether it's fostering a more comfortable work environment or improving women's leadership abilities, the objectives need to be clear.

One common pitfall is the lack of a budget. Without financial support, these initiatives can't bring in speakers or develop further. As Elise pointed out, a budget reflects the firm's priorities. If the firm is serious about empowering women, it needs to allocate resources accordingly.

Another issue is the distribution of roles within the firm. Women often find themselves on "housekeeping" committees, focusing on culture, while men are on committees that shape the firm's future. This imbalance perpetuates stereotypes and hinders women's advancement within the firm.

Coaching has tremendous potential to help identify ways to move past these challenges, but the keys to its success lie in implementation and customization, and holding individuals accountable for their goals. Professional development, on the other hand, is about learning new skills. Together, they form a powerful combination for personal and professional growth.

Elise also emphasized the importance of men mentoring young women, as it can significantly impact the firm's future. This mentorship can help break down barriers and foster a more inclusive environment, benefiting not just women but the firm as a whole. Ultimately, a law firm that is a healthy, safe, and supportive workplace for women in law is a firm that will see continued growth through collaboration and success.