

The Secret Sauce of a Successful Women's Initiative

By **Lynda A. Bennett**¹

About five years ago, several associates across different practice groups within my firm approached me separately to ask why our firm did not have an active women's initiative. They expressed concern that junior women did not really know or have access to the women partners. They also noticed that there were built-in informal forums for our male colleagues to gather and get to know one another (e.g., firm softball team, basketball team, golf outings). What those women did not realize is that our firm did have a program geared toward women, but it had an external focus to put women together to network and develop business.

The need being identified by my junior colleagues was a more basic one: Women who work together share common interests, professional goals, challenges, and sometimes anxieties. They were looking for a place where they could talk about their day-to-day issues and find out whether their experiences were unique. They wanted to know whether the more senior women within the firm had any tips or best practices to address issues in a professional and satisfying way. And at the most basic level, the women were looking for a constructive way to get out of their practice area silos from time to time to learn more about what was going on elsewhere in the firm and to have an opportunity for professional camaraderie.

So, in collaboration with those women (who included junior, midlevel, and senior associates as well as a few partners), I embarked on creating a women's initiative very different from the ones I have read about for years and had participated in within my own firm in the past. The founding members and I started with a simple vision: to empower and support our women to achieve professional and personal success. We then developed a mission statement to guide our efforts: "To create an environment that fosters personal connections, trust, camaraderie, and networking opportunities. We will celebrate and

embrace our differences. We will encourage creativity, generosity, and passion in all of our professional and personal endeavors."

In taking these preliminary steps, we made the conscious and intentional decision to be internally focused, meaning our programs and events were directed toward making sure that women from different practice areas had places to meet one another and forums to discuss firm life as well as career development and advancement. We acknowledged that business development and building core competencies are crucially important to a woman's professional life, but those issues would have a secondary focus for our group. We would address those skills through our women sharing their own personal experiences about rainmaking and networking rather than focusing on external networking events or bringing in consultants to lecture on such topics. We wanted our women to start building authentic and genuine relationships that would pave the way for honest, "real" talk. We understood that not all women within the firm would be interested in actively participating in the kind of initiative we were planning, and we accepted that. We wanted to find what I often refer to as "the coalition of the willing"—whether that was 40 women or four—and build our community from there.

To get started, we knew our first program could not be a formal panel presentation geared toward having our women share their most acute confidence issues, practical workplace tensions, or managing "work-life balance." Instead, we circulated an email to all women attorneys announcing the creation of the initiative and provided a survey to gauge interest and needs. The response was extremely positive, so we got to work developing a realistic calendar of events.

We purposefully started small, with largely social gatherings (e.g., a standing "no agenda" monthly

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lunch and cocktail events). Our first formal programs were panel discussions that comprised only our women talking only to our women. We shared five things we wished we had known earlier in our careers and how to develop, maintain, and cultivate a network. We were intentional about populating the panels with women from different practice areas across our different office locations. The panelists had varying levels of seniority. The moderators of the panels were among our most junior women attorneys. This was done intentionally to allow our junior women to have an early leadership opportunity and to communicate to our audience the broader message that junior women can **and should** feel free to speak to more senior women in the firm.

Once a positive buzz started to build around our women's initiative, we added programs that had a decidedly more provocative bent. We started talking about issues that exist in every large law firm but are taboo—for example, how to respond to an unexpected or unwelcome remark that is made by a colleague, an adversary, a client, or a judge. We also addressed gender difference associated with the attorney review process and provided practical tips about how to discuss successes and challenges during a review. When these topics were teed up, very clear ground rules were established at the beginning of the program: An honest conversation was going to take place, and to facilitate that conversation, confidentiality **must** reign supreme. We also made clear the conversation was taking place in a “no judgment zone” because these topics never conclude with a right or wrong answer. Women partners often started these discussions by sharing personal stories—of both successes and failures in addressing issues in the moment. Once the partners shared, some of the associates and counsel in the room shared too. More important, many junior lawyers in the room did not share anything. They listened. Sometimes they followed up after the program was over. Each of them was able to find women who had similar questions, concerns, and approaches to life because, as we developed programs like this, we were intentional about putting a mix of introverts and extroverts on our panels. We wanted to make sure that our attendees would be able to find someone they could relate to and feel comfortable speaking with. In a particularly thoughtful fashion, we also put “plants” in the audience, arming them with questions that we strongly suspected women wanted to ask but might be afraid to in a larger setting. This, too, opened the floodgates of conversation and empowered more women to speak.

With each year, our women's initiative has grown by leaps and bounds. We have evolved to tackling even more challenging topics, like how to address mental health while continuing to function in the hard-charging and demanding profession we have chosen. We also have hosted collaborative discussions where we have shared strategies about how to remain resilient in the face of missteps and disappointments. We are able to have these conversations only because we have spent years building our trust circle and

evidencing to each other our unwavering loyalty to our confidentiality commitment.

All the while, we have remembered our roots: Women who know and like each other at work will have greater connection to their workplace and will perform at higher levels as a result. We have stayed true to those roots by having an annual dinner that includes women across all our offices, in dinner groups with no more than eight women. The dinner assignments are made to ensure that attendees are in different practice areas, come from different offices, and have varying levels of seniority. We empower our junior women at those dinners to be table captains and lead discussions of both personal and professional topics. In addition, we host one “light and breezy” event each year where our women can engage their creative side and have a casual evening of fun, e.g., a crafting event. Finally, to create a culture of inclusion among our women, we have devised an “Ambassador Program,” where midlevel to senior associates are assigned to welcome new women who have joined the firm. Our ambassadors are tasked with writing a welcome note and delivering a specially branded women's initiative gift. The ambassadors then make sure that the new hires are aware of upcoming women's initiative events and offer to bring them to those programs and facilitate introductions to other group members.

I also have developed and implemented “shout out” emails that are blasted to all women's initiative members about once per quarter. These emails highlight the accomplishments of our women when they close a deal, win an oral argument, take their first deposition, land a new client, receive an external recognition, add value to the firm through work on another committee or initiative, and the like. No win is too big or too small for inclusion in the email. And again, the emails showcase women from all practice areas, all offices, and all levels of seniority. Of course, the recipients of the shout-outs are always appreciative and grateful for the public recognition that they have received, because women are notoriously challenged in the realm of self-advocacy. However, an even bigger benefit in sending these emails is the impact that they have on the women in the firm who receive and read them. They routinely tell me that it makes them proud to work with and among such accomplished women. They also tell me that it makes them want to do more and be better so they, too, can get some shout-out love. But my greatest joy has come from the women who are learning the lesson of the shout-out email when they reach out to tell me something good about themselves, i.e., they have stepped up to the megaphone to proudly share an accomplishment—oftentimes a first and important step toward empowerment and confidence for them.

February 2020 marks the five-year anniversary of our women's initiative, and I cannot be more proud of what we have built **and** sustained. I have made many new friends, and even as I enter my 26th year of practice, I continue to learn from my colleagues new ways to enjoy practicing as a woman in Big Law. I am

confident that we are all better because we have each other and our women's initiative.

So, what is the secret sauce of a successful women's initiative?

First, a leader who is passionate about paving the way for women to embrace their confidence and secure the tools needed to achieve career goals. She must know how to empower women by sharing her own personal experiences but also understand that war story monologues can be counterproductive. To move the needle, the leader must create forums for conversation and facilitate active participation by all members.

Second, a collection of associates who are eager for early leadership opportunities and understand the importance of community. These women are likely to be among your organization's highest achievers and they are going to make the time, over and above their billable hour responsibilities, to participate in a labor of love that will enrich their career development.

Third, it is crucially important to have a clear vision and consistent implementation of that vision through your programming and events. Many women's initiatives struggle and fizzle out because they strive to do too much and the "perfect" becomes the enemy of the good. Be intentional in the selection of your topics and your panelists. Be realistic in terms of how much time busy attorneys will be willing and able to commit to your programming. Be inclusive of all personality types and be cognizant of the varying personal lives and commitments of your members.

Fourth, make sure your membership has direct and regular input into your programming. Short surveys are an important tool, and so is being responsive to member-suggested discussion topics because that creates buy-in and a sense of ownership among all members of the initiative.

Finally, the cornerstones of sustained success are making sure that your initiative is based on trust and delivers value to members who are "giving up" billable hours in order to participate. While it took some time for us to develop those characteristics, the reason our initiative is robust and our events are routinely well attended is because we are able to engage in real talk about the issues that are most important to our members and their career development. We cannot and do not promise to solve problems or eliminate challenges. Instead, we strive to provide actionable advice and supportive listening that allow members to know they are not alone and they can achieve their career goals.

As demonstrated above, leadership, collaboration, inclusivity, and mutual respect are the key ingredients of the secret sauce. Women's initiatives that combine these ingredients can be successful regardless of their size. And it is equally important to remember that success is not in numbers—not the number of programs you offer or the number of members you have. Success is offering a few events each year that have great impact by teaching women about themselves and others and equips them with one or two tools to enhance who they are. Success is when women learn and grow from and with one another, genuinely and organically, and the organization's greatest role in that success is offering them the space and support to do so.

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