



## Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

### Episode 2 - The Secret Sauce of a Successful Women's Initiative

By [Megan Monson](#), [Rachel Moseson Dikovics](#), [Lynda Bennett](#), Natalie Dallavalle  
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- Amanda Cipriano:** Welcome to the Lowenstein Sandler podcast series: The Women's Initiative Network, "Real Talk." I'm Amanda Cipriano, an associate attorney and member of the Women's Initiative Network at Lowenstein Sandler. Before we begin, please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast series at [lowenstein.com/podcasts](https://www.lowenstein.com/podcasts), or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, Google Podcasts, and SoundCloud. Now let's take a listen.
- Megan Monson:** Thank you for joining us today for the first substantive episode of the Women's Initiative Network's "Real Talk." I'm one of your co-hosts Megan Monson counsel in Lowenstein Sandler's Employee Benefits & Executive Compensation group.
- Rachel Dikovics:** I'm Rachel Dikovics an associate in Lowenstein Sandler's White Collar Criminal Defense practice group.
- Megan Monson:** Today, we wanted to share how the Lowenstein Women's Initiative Network got started and impart a few key takeaways to help our listeners take the secret sauce to form their own successful women's initiative. The secrets to success is twofold. It involves women who plan the programming and women who attend the programming. Strong leadership and strong participation are both essential to facilitate bonding, promoting real talk, and providing a range of perspectives on the issues that women face, as well as the ways that we confront, challenge, and overcome these issues.
- Rachel Dikovics:** What better way to discuss the secret sauce and how to start and keep running a successful women's initiative network than speaking to the brains and beauty behind the operation: WIN founder A. Lynda Bennett, head of Lowenstein Women's Initiative Network and Chair of the firm's Insurance Recovery practice, and Natalie Dallavalle co-founder of WIN and current associate counsel .litigation, for Public Service Enterprise Group, otherwise known as PSE&G, New Jersey's largest public utility.
- Lynda Bennett:** Thank you so much, Rachel and Megan, for having me today, I'm really looking forward to taking a walk down memory lane, and there are few topics that I'm more passionate about than our Women's Initiative.
- Natalie Dallavalle:** Thank you, Megan, Rachel, and Lynda as well for inviting me to join you today. I am extremely excited to be talking about WIN, as it was part of really my formative years as an attorney and one of my favorite and best parts of

when I was working at Lowenstein Sandler. So I'm really happy to share and impart some words of wisdom today.

**Megan Monson:** Thank you again, both for joining us. We really appreciate it. So to start off this conversation, tell us where did the idea for WIN come from? How did you get it started?

**Natalie Dallavalle:** So, now you're really racking my memory, because we're going way back, way back to the year 2014 when I was an associate at Lowenstein Sandler. I had been there about maybe two years at the time and Lynda was a close friend and mentor of mine and we've since changed buildings and offices since then. So this is going back to our old office and I went down to Lynda's floor and really just came and broached the topic. It was a really grassroots initiative and we were just talking about, why doesn't the firm have a central group for women to get together and talk, whatever that might be. Why don't we have some group or initiative for women to facilitate foster, lift one another up, right?

Because there are so many women at the firm in general and Lynda, the angel that she is, decided to take that idea and really run with it. We walked through how the history of the firm has ebbed and flowed, and there had been other initiatives and what worked and what didn't, trying to hone in like, well, what would this be, right? What would the mission of this initiative be? And, really, when Lynda took that idea that evening, it helped to lift it off the ground.

**Lynda Bennett:** Yeah and I just, I want to add, I think what really resonated when Natalie came to talk to me was the need for or the desire for connection to other women in the firm. We'd both worked in large law firms for almost the entirety of our career at that point when that conversation took place, and there are certainly a number of formal mentoring programs, formal women's initiative programs, associate development programs, all of these things, but they were all very formalized where oftentimes it involved consultants coming to speak to us, outside speakers coming in. There really was not a forum for the women in this law firm to get to know each other on a personal level, on a one-on-one level. Creating those natural, genuine mentoring connections is really what we were striving, I think, to do. When Natalie came to talk to me, the word that popped into my head was connection and the need for real connection among the women in this firm.

**Natalie Dallavalle:** Yeah. I think one of the hardest things was just creating like, "Well, what are we going to do? What is this going to be? And what is the need that we're fulfilling here for women at the firm?" Because there are so many different directions you can take with a women's initiative, to something very formal and structured to informal where you're just getting together casually and trying to figure out what was the need we were fulfilling and, like Lynda said, I think that really was the need for connection just getting to know the women at the firm, getting to know each other, buying in with one another and then from there, how do we take this idea of connection and use it as the basis to form the organization, and then get buy-in from other people? So Lynda was really the one that ran this up the chain, fully up the chain, got the funding and then lifted it off the ground.

- Lynda Bennett:** The run up the chain was, we're doing this and I need money. I think that's how it went.
- Natalie Dallavalle:** We needed money. That's for sure. That's all we needed.
- Rachel Dikovics:** So, Natalie, I want to ask you, I think the fact that you decided to go to a Lynda with your idea speaks to what leadership is needed for an organization like this to succeed, and Lynda's too modest to talk about herself in this way, but I want to ask you, why did you choose Lynda to bring your idea to?
- Natalie Dallavalle:** Really great question. I mean, Lynda was a mentor and personal friend, right? The first level was comfort, right? I felt I could talk to her about this, but also I knew Lynda could get this done. Right. it's twofold. So I had a comfort level and ease with her that I could talk openly about this idea and express the need. But I also knew that Lynda would be able to execute the idea, of being a person who is, what I would call a mover and a shaker, right? A voice that people listen to. Lynda, I'm not sure, where you on the board or different communities at that time.
- Lynda Bennett:** I was.
- Natalie Dallavalle:** I feel you were maybe the first woman on the compensation committee at that time. So I knew Lynda could get this done, and I knew people respected her and would listen to her, and that was very important. So she would be able to take what we did and really bring it to fruition.
- Megan Monson:** I think this was such a great idea that you had, Natalie, and going to speak to Lynda about it, to get it moving. What was the reaction from other women at the firm when you announced you were rolling this out and hosting your first event?
- Lynda Bennett:** So one of the things that Natalie and I talked about before we formally rolled it out, was we were going to be steadfast in our view that the perfect was not going to become the enemy of the good. That we were not going to try to be everything to everybody all the time like that. Those were two very important guiding principles before we even formally rolled it out to anybody. I think Natalie got tired of me saying this. I said, "I don't care if five people show up," because they want to be there. We're accomplishing something, if 50 people show up great. But if five people come and they're genuinely interested in what we're trying to do, we've won something. That's how WIN came to be. We were looking for wins. So when we formally rolled it out, we started out with a very light and breezy holiday cocktail gathering.
- I remember feeling very nervous talking to Natalie saying, we threw a party and we didn't know if anybody was going to come. We were absolutely shocked, amazed, and overwhelmed, frankly, by the number of women that filled that conference room. It wasn't just because we had a chocolate waterfall and a hot chocolate bar. We also did have games, which is another core signature WIN event requirement. But so we started social because again, we were looking for connection so the best and easiest place to start was the informal gathering and letting people start to get to know each other. From there, we then put a survey out and we were, again, as another one of

my mentors says that people get tired of hearing: we give them what they want. So we sent out a survey and then we developed programming around what our members were interested in hearing about.

**Rachel Dikovics:** The actual three tenants of WIN that still exist are games, chocolate fountain, and surveys.

**Lynda Bennett:** That's true. It's all about the food.

**Natalie Dallavalle:** Yeah. I agree. Just to jump in there, that first event, I was extremely nervous that nobody would come and when women showed up, it validated that we were onto something and we were filling a void for people; that this was a need that people had wanted, and that warmed my heart, that we had caught on to something. Now it was with the follow-up and the survey: how do we give the people what they want? Right. It's not just about what I had a vision of and wanted to push forward, but what do people actually want to see, want to do, want to get together? But really, the base of it is we need to know each other, we need to be invested in one another, and I think just even that simple social event was laying that basis and foundation.

**Rachel Dikovics:** Right? So Lynda, I want to shift the focus a little bit more to the present day and ask you, how have you seen the organization change from the time that it got started to today?

**Lynda Bennett:** Well, to begin with, it is amazing to me, how many women who come through our recruiting process are aware of WIN. It is an established brand. It is an established program that people outside the women, outside of the firm, know about coming all the way in and are interested in getting involved in and learning more about, and then when they get here, really getting actively involved. Because, remember, you have to keep in mind, participating in a women's initiative or any other non-billable event in a big law setting is pretty hard to get people to do, to make the time to do that. I have been really impressed by the number of women who have gotten, not just involved, not just showing up to stuff, but really taking a piece of ownership of this organization and looking for ways to put their mark on it.

I would say our greatest moment of shining was actually when the pandemic hit. Unknowingly, WIN was building for five years to be ready for that because women were, as we all know, they became teachers overnight. They had ill parents they needed to look after and what not, and all of that falls to the shoulders of women. We had such a tight connection with each other, from all of the in-person programming and monthly lunches and all of this, that we were really ready. This community was ready to get together to support one another.

And Rachel, I tip my hat to you, you came up with the idea of the weekly cocktail hours, and we had 50 and 60 women on those calls every week. They weren't just there to raise a glass. They were there to draw support from these women that had their backs before, and they needed their backs most in that moment of crisis. So we've come a long way. We've got more to do, but in the five years, the thing that stands out to me the most is how many people find this to be a labor of love and own a piece of it.

**Megan Monson:** That's fantastic and so great to hear. Throughout the years, how have you guys stayed true to the core WIN message and the reason why WIN was founded?

**Natalie Dallavalle:** I think it's really important to have that mission statement and keep coming back to it, to ground you in the purpose of why you started it. Because it's easy to go astray, right, and take different directions or let other voices influence how it is. So, like Lynda said, "It can't be everything to everyone." The organization is there and it exists for when you need it and you're ready to come to it. You can't try to continue to change it just to fit everybody's needs. So I think one of the hardest part is just realizing it's not going to be an overnight success, right? It's not going to take off right from day one.

It has to be an organic natural build. You can't force people to be friends. You can't force women to show up; like that field of dreams, if you build it, they will come, that is the mentality, and really the focus. So, going back to the mission statement and having that as a guiding post throughout the years, I think it was very, very important to keep that focus. And of course you can pivot, adapt, right? If it's, something's not working, you could do that. You can change your mission statement, but we really wanted to remain true to that original grassroots idea, right? Which was what was so important and where that love and passion existed and remember why did we create this? This is why to have that, but it takes years to foster that connection between people. It's very important that you have patience and not expect the unexpected, because again, it's there for when you'd need it, and if it's not for you, then you'll come in and out. I think that was important to remember.

**Lynda Bennett:** I think one of the greatest surprises and challenges with WIN over the years, was when we embarked on doing this, it was like, "Yeah, sure, you want to form another committee, go ahead, form another committee." And when WIN really started to take hold and there was success and buzz around it, I was surprised at all of the different angles we're coming out of this. I was getting emails from men in the firm, "Oh, this has something to do with women. You need to handle. I have this friend, I want them to come in and talk to the women at the firm." So you do have to be a little fierce in your protection of what you're trying to accomplish, because when something starts to become successful, then people want to be around it and want to impose their will and their view on it, so that was one thing.

The other thing is, I wanted to keep it real because that's what we do. When we have real talk, not every program that we did went well, part of us giving people what they wanted was bringing in speakers from the outside, doing some outside- of- the -box women empowerment programming that did not go well. You have to pause in that moment, take the step back, take stock of why it didn't go well. Look, not every program is going to be a home run, but if you don't learn lessons from why those that failed, you're not going to be able to sustain and get bigger and stronger and better after it. I will just share, and this is specific to the women of the Lowenstein Women's Initiative Network.

Our greatest programs are when we are talking to each other. Formal programs, informal programs, when we are sharing our real raw feelings, and, as Natalie said, you don't do that program once. This is something

where you've got to crawl before you walk, before you run. But our best programs are always when we have a panel discussion of our women (and by the way, Natalie, we still love you). We bring our alumni back. So we'll bring in somebody from the outside, but they have to have that connection alone. But having those forums where we're talking to each other, that's where the magic happens.

**Rachel Dikovics:** Lynda, I want to drill down a little bit more on something that you said, which is, learning from events that were potentially not successful. You mentioned earlier that serving the members was one of the things that you did right from the beginning. So how has getting feedback from your membership helped to hold the members' interest over the years and build the WIN brand?

**Lynda Bennett:** Well, I think lots of people send out surveys and then nothing ever happens from them. When we send out surveys and we respond to the feedback that's received, again, I think that creates greater buy-in. I'll give a specific example. When we started doing our real talk conversations, we thought it was very important to establish breakout discussions where we had partners, councils, junior associates, all lumped together. One of the very valuable pieces of feedback that we received from one of our surveys was that some of the women would feel more comfortable in the breakout discussions, if it was more aligned with seniority, meaning they were going to be far more willing to share their thoughts if they were among a peer group, as opposed to sharing some of their thoughts with a partner, particularly one maybe that they work with, sitting there for a particular discussion point. So, sending out the survey, but being responsive and acting on the feedback that's given is really important to create that buy-in and that feeling of ownership in the larger organization.

**Natalie Dallavalle:** Yeah, I agree. And then you can't be afraid to have those conversations with people like partners and say, "This is not what they want," for this particular program. We're not going to have a specific level of people in the room or mixed in breakout rooms, and having people understand, and striking that balance of having those conversations of, and filling that need, right? Because sometimes people can be offended a little, why can't I go to that program? Or how will I stay for the conversation right, and having them realize, well, maybe an associate doesn't feel as comfortable talking about a sensitive topic when their partner that they directly work for is in the room. So, really keeping that self- perspective and reflection and checking yourself to understand what are people's needs, and the growing pains come from, not recognizing those situations at first and learning from those mistakes.

**Lynda Bennett:** I think one topic that we haven't touched on that really is a key ingredient to the secret sauce, is trust and how you're going to create that, as hokey as it is to say, the trust circle. Where you have a conversation, you can share a war story or a personal experience that you've gone through and know that, that's going to actually stay in the room. We say that all the time, particularly when we're talking about a sensitive topic, such as mental health, such as jerk bosses and what we saw, Natalie and I, the first touchy lightning rod type of topic that we had, there were not a lot of people talking among the associate or council ranks, but what we did have were partners coming in and sharing their personal stories, and what we had were a lot of active listeners sitting around that table.

Then what we had was a few months go by and we do a few more programs and people's personal stories didn't make it into the gossip mill at the firm. People started to believe that what was said in the room stayed in the room, and then, as we started to tackle these more difficult topics, we had more participation across every level of seniority because we trust each other. That is crucial, though. What is said in the room must stay in the room.

**Natalie Dallavalle:** I think, then, naturally, what you saw from that was people becoming real friends, right? It wasn't just a program that you spoke at, but we were bonding and connecting outside of just a lunch or a program, which was very important but took years to achieve. You also have to, for lack of a better phrase, but put your money where your mouth is. You have to, it's a labor of love and people need to see that and they can feel that if they don't. I think people, I hope, really felt that from Lynda and I and the other women who were part of establishing WIN in those early days. This was a true labor of love for us and to see how vested we were, how open we were and available we were to women, right?. It just wasn't putting on a program and then that's it, our door was closed. I think people, I hope, felt inspired by that and that resonated with them to then want to continue being a member of the organization and then participate themselves in the planning and programming.

**Lynda Bennett:** And just one other thing I want to add too that's important is, I made a joke about it before but it's dead on serious. We have to be real. So when we touch these sensitive topics, we never messaged that we're going to solve these problems overnight. You can't. So what we strive for and each of you in this podcast will smile when I say it, but we're always striving to give actionable advice. That is, that is one of our themes. It's got to be actionable advice. We're not going to sit around and just complain and identify the problem and complain about it.

We're not going to set the unrealistic expectation that after we have this discussion, we're going to be able to solve this problem overnight and we're going to have 50 percent equity women partners at the firm and all of the rest of the things that we like to strive toward. But what we are going to have is actionable advice and actionable items that you can do. What can you do to contribute to solving this problem and sharing each other's strategies and tips. We all have different styles. What we try to do is put enough out there on the table that people can pick up three things that they think will work for them and incorporate that into their style.

**Rachel Dikovics:** Lynda, you mentioned before that, especially in the early days of these WIN discussions, it was often the partners who are the ones speaking. I think that's often still true. The partners speak first particularly, when it's about a sensitive issue, mental health, we've recently discussed miscarriages and infertility issues. What kind of impact do you think it has on junior mid-level women? When a partner is willing to speak about some challenging things that she's experienced?

**Lynda Bennett:** So, I'm going to be dead on honest, I think for a large portion of our women population, it's empowering, it drives home the message that you're not alone, that the practice of law in a big law setting is incredibly difficult. We've

made strides, and there's long way to go. But on the flip side, I also think that the partner speaking first sometimes will be deflating.

I mean, I've had women come to me after some of these very challenging programs and say, "I got to tell you, it's great that you've kept at it, but if things haven't changed in the 27 years that you've been practicing, how am I going to force that change?" So I think it's valuable for us to share where we've been, what we've gone through, and I want people to receive it through that empowerment lens, but it doesn't always land that way because you know what? There is a lot that's broken here and it's been broken for a long time. There's a lot of superficial chatter around wanting to change it. But it's going to take a lot of work and a lot of women participating in WIN to make that happen and to stay in the game long enough for it to happen.

**Megan Monson:** So for WIN, which is six plus years in the making, I mean, when you started it, did you envision that it would be what it is today? And as a follow up on that is, where do you see the organization in another five years?

**Lynda Bennett:** Natalie, you can start it and I'll finish it.

**Natalie Dallavalle:** I will say when I left Lowenstein Sandler to go in-house, I guess two and a half years ago, at this point, I couldn't believe how it took off from what we thought of and then what it was becoming after about five years at that point, a little less than five years. It was amazing to see that. When I transitioned out of the company and out of the law firm to a company in house, I felt this is in good hands. This has longevity. This can sustain itself. It can make it. And just from a personal perspective, it's one of the things I miss the most about Lowenstein Sandler, that I couldn't believe what a need it filled for me, but I thought that the vision after that amount of time, we were really there. We had really established it and that it now was in a self-sustaining mechanism where we did have a core participant in membership that it could keep going and changing, right? Changing with the times and pivoting as needed.

**Lynda Bennett:** When I think back to when Natalie came to my office and we were talking about this concept, to see what WIN has become today is mind blowing to me. I'm so proud of it. It's beyond a labor of love. For our five-year anniversary, one of our marketing professionals put together a video of the five-year in review and I cried hysterically. I think the first 15 times I watched it. I still open it up and watch it on a bad day to remember how many amazing women I've come to know and love and be deeply connected with through the Women's Initiative program. It exceeded my expectation times a million times, and I'm so excited to see what the next five years are going to bring with people like Rachel and Megan at the helm of this, I can only imagine that it's going to exceed my expectations times a million times again.

**Rachel Dikovics:** I've got one final question for you, both. Linda, you mentioned earlier that it is difficult, especially in a big law setting, but I imagine in any other corporate setting too, to get people to commit time to things like a women's initiative, which for attorneys is not billable work when everybody has minimum hours to meet and lots of people to service. What do you think the secret is? Natalie, I definitely opened this up to you as well. What's the secret to getting people to commit and to spend time on an initiative like this?



**Lynda Bennett:** When what you're doing is valuable to them, makes them feel like a better person, makes them feel they're not alone in the bad times. When they feel you are going to celebrate their victory the same or more than they are, when they win that case, when they close that deal. I think being an organization where people feel enriched and that they're growing and empowered by their involvement, it's not going to be a hard sell to get them involved. That's what I've learned in the six years of being part of WIN.

**Natalie Dallavalle:** Yeah. I think people need to understand, you have to have patience when you start this, you need to be vested and show up, right? It has to be something you genuinely want to do. That you feel vested in it and people will be drawn to that and listen to what do these women want? I think, certainly after this many years of the program, you see how valuable it is. So in forming these relationships and bonds as that initial concept,, we want to connect with other people at the firm. It then becomes, if people see the value in, like Lynda saying, of your network, how do you leverage that? Like myself and then you're going in house. Well, those connections were leveraged from WIN. How do you promote each other internally? People see that they're able to promote, lift one another up.

Other women are making partners because of who has your back from this initiative and that all grew, again, organically or naturally from it. So I think when other women see that success and positivity, you want to be a part of that. I think that's part of that secret sauce that just naturally comes over time and whatever mission you want to form for your own women's initiative. I think it's very important that you try to stay as true to that as possible and people will just naturally come and participate.

**Megan Monson:** Lynda and Natalie, you guys have shared some great suggestions and tips as well as some pain points that you faced in going through and launching the Lowenstein Women's Initiative. Do you have any final parting words of wisdom to our listeners?

**Lynda Bennett:** I really don't. Other than you will be a better person and more enriched when you get an organization like this off the ground. Thank you so much for having me today. I really enjoyed taking this walk down memory lane.

**Natalie Dallavalle:** I would say if you think that, for other people who are listening, if there's a need that you feel needs to be fulfilled, to not be afraid to be that person to do it right. Seek out others who can help with that mission. I think that's the most important thing for others. Don't be afraid to try or at least ask and maybe it'll ebb and flow or fail or succeed. But through WIN and the success that I see from that, it just brings me so much joy. I'm just so happy that these relationships I've had have stood the test of time no matter where you are, whether you're still at that firm or not. What you've built continues on in the women that you've connected with. They're going to be part of your lives for a really long time and you have no idea how valuable it is. It's funny that it all actually relates back to this idea and to WIN. I'm very, very thankful for the role that it's played in my life.

**Megan Monson:** Well, we're very thankful, Natalie, for both you and Lynda joining us today and sharing your insight and wisdom with us and our listeners. I personally

thought this was a great discussion and learned a lot and hopefully our listeners did as well. We really hope that people will take advantage of and heed the advice that you've shared.

**Rachel Dikovics:** Yeah. Thank you. Again, Lynda and Natalie. This was, as usual, a really inspiring discussion, and you have both been exceptional leaders to WIN and great friends and role models to Megan and me. I think I speak for both of us in saying so to our listeners, we hope that you continue to join us for this “Real Talk series” as we explore lots of other topics relevant to professional women. How to navigate through some of the challenges that we face, and, most importantly and what's always most important to us that, we're helping our listeners and helping other women realize that no matter what you're going through professionally or personally, you're not alone.

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