



## At Sidebar

by Rachel Clark Hughey

# Mentoring and Sponsorship: The Difference Between Success and Failure

### Some of the challenges that women in the law

faced even 30 years ago—being one of just a few women in a graduating class, being refused interviews, other forms of blatant discrimination—have mostly disappeared. Women make up around half of graduating law students and frequently just as much of a law firm's entering class. Women are Supreme Court justices, managing partners, and general counsel. (Our firm recently won a trial with a team made up entirely of women.)

There is no dispute that there continues to be room for improvement, though. According to publicly available statistics, only 20 percent of Fortune 500 company general counsel are women. Approximately 15 percent of shareholders at large law firms are women. A dismal 4 percent of managing partners at the largest 200 law firms are women. But, more and more, the primary challenges that women attorneys face are the same challenges that men face—pressures to bill, pressures to originate work, pressures to continue to develop expertise, and pressure to find time to pursue a personal life outside of the office.

One of the biggest issues facing any attorney is the challenge of good mentoring (advising) and sponsorship (advocating). Good mentoring early on and sponsorship throughout an attorney's career can be the difference between success and failure. Mentoring is often the difference between a great opportunity and no opportunity, advice on office politics and political missteps, and active promotion versus stagnation. Sponsorship (or lack thereof) can be the difference between advancement and failure. Quality mentoring and sponsorship may be one of the greatest challenges facing women (and any minority) attorneys because often people choose to mentor people like them. This unconscious bias can have a long-lasting negative impact on a woman's ability to be successful, because on average there are still more men in senior positions than women.

This is not to say that men cannot mentor and sponsor women. I, like many women, have been primarily (but not exclusively) mentored

and sponsored by men. But sometimes making those connections can be a little more challenging for women. Junior women attorneys should seek out and nurture mentoring opportunities from both male and female attorneys.

What can a young attorney do to find a successful mentoring or sponsoring relationship? First, an attorney has to recognize that mentoring and sponsorship are not one-way streets. A senior attorney is much more likely to mentor and sponsor someone that also supports the senior attorney. In other words, developing a mentoring relationship

requires sacrifice and dedication on the part of the mentee. Senior attorneys tend to want to mentor junior attorneys who are ambitious, eager, filled with potential, and willing to help out when needed.

Not all women—just like not all men—are going to have the personal connection or professional fit necessary to make a strong mentoring or sponsorship connection. Nevertheless, I challenge senior women attorneys to recognize that because of unconscious bias, some junior women attorneys may not receive the mentoring opportunities of their male peers. Therefore, senior women attorneys should make an effort to be available to more junior women attorneys and help them find good

mentoring relationships.

As for women attorneys who are not obtaining the opportunities necessary for their success, there are many environments where talented and hard-working women attorneys can be successful. If you are not in that kind of environment, for whatever reason, consider finding a better fit. Your next organization will, hopefully, appreciate and nurture your talents.

Hopefully, someday in the practice of law there will no longer be “women's issues” but just the same issues that all attorneys face. Until then, attorneys should recognize that women attorneys still face special challenges and make an effort to ensure they are getting the same opportunities as their peers. ☺



*Rachel Clark Hughey is a shareholder at the law firm of Merchant & Gould in Minneapolis and specializes in patent litigation and appellate practice. © 2014 Rachel Clark Hughey. All rights reserved.*