

Growing into a Leadership Role at Your Firm

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As an attorney, you face different professional and personal choices at various points in your career. This is especially true for women lawyers, who often are striving to achieve career goals while planning and raising families, tending to elderly parents, or volunteering their time to causes and organizations. Any woman lawyer therefore must consider professional and personal choices in the context of her career goals. The precise path up the corporate or law firm ladder will differ from lawyer to lawyer. The steps necessary to continue on the path, however, are very much the same. Leadership and professional development are important steps along the long path to success in the practice of law.

At a law firm, there are various positions that can help you move up the law firm ladder. You can seek the opportunity to be a staffing partner, pro bono administrator, women's initiative chairperson, practice group leader, department chair, executive committee member, managing partner, or head of any of the other numerous committees and initiatives that are so integral to the operation of the firm. Before considering these options, however, consider what it takes to be a successful leader, one who advances the strategies of the organization through her own vision, while also inspiring creativity, productivity, and loyalty throughout the ranks. Do you have what it takes? Is the time right for you to pursue a leadership role? Consider these questions as you prepare for the challenge.

Ask Yourself If You Really Want to Be a Leader, Then Connect with One

Not everyone is cut out to be a leader, and even among those who are, you need to understand exactly what you are getting into and the timing has to be right. For example, at a law firm, you are probably not ready for high-level leadership if you have not already developed a personal book of business. Business development is the kind of direct investment in your firm that a leader is expected to make, extending its viability and strengthening its bottom line in previously untapped ways. When you develop business, you also experience the role of client relationship partner or partner-in-charge—the first, and in many ways the most important, leadership position. Leadership also takes time and commitment. In addition to the normal duties of being a lawyer, a new leader needs to delve into her assignment and understand and embrace the new leadership responsibilities. That takes substantial time and effort. Make sure the timing is right. If you decide that you are ready to take the plunge into leadership in law, commit to make it happen. Go after every opportunity that presents itself.

Start by finding a mentor, male or female, who is already a leader in your firm. A strong mentor can help you identify your strengths, talk with you about your approach and strategy, and assist in more fully integrating you within your organization. The established law firm leader can also explain exactly what is involved in the job and what would be expected of you if you were chosen for the position. Be proactive in finding the right mentor (or more than one). Whom do you respect within your organization? Who

approaches leadership in a way that you admire? Who has influence? Once you identify that person, and he or she agrees to assist you, be proactive to make sure the relationship pays off.

Set Goals and Action Plans

Once you have determined that you are ready for a leadership role and you have found a mentor, set your goals within the context of your current business reality and the internal and external forces that necessarily will impact their achievement. Take into account time, cost, quality, measurability, personal style, and alignment with your firm's goals. List action steps that you can realistically take to achieve these goals. Make sure you use and rely on any firm's resources available to you. If the firm does not have such resources (e.g., training programs, technology tools, a library, or knowledge management team), then ask your mentor to support and guide you in your "ask" for the assistance you need to help you achieve your goals. In setting your goals, think about the big picture first. True leaders think long term and strategically, so pay attention to details and avoid spending unnecessary time on minutia. Finally, make sure to track your progress. Keep your mentor updated and let your mentor trumpet your successes.

Build Relationships and Credibility

To achieve a leadership position in your firm and to succeed in that position when you do achieve it, you need to be an effective communicator, and more importantly you must forge connections with other firm attorneys, both senior and junior to you, firm administration, and other employees who can support you in various key ways. Perfect the art of building relationships and working your network, develop your networking skills, and emphasize your accessibility, responsiveness, collaboration, and openness to new ideas. You will build relationships and credibility at all levels. These relationships will pay off in a great way.

And you need credibility. As a professional, you want to be perceived by your peers as one of the best. As a result, you need to continue to deliver the best possible work product and excellent client service. At the same time, you need to continue to raise your professional profile in the business and legal communities, enhance your reputation, and generally come to be considered an authority in what you do. Don't underestimate the importance of extracurricular activities and events. Delivering presentations, writing articles or working with the media, participating in bar associations or industry organizations, or taking on community or civic roles are a few ways attorneys can build the credibility necessary for leadership. And do not just "join" organizations—lead the organizations you join! These extracurricular leadership positions will provide excellent training for the roles you plan to pursue within your own firm.

Find Your Own Personal Style and Work to Improve It

Do not try to lead the way a man or even another woman leads. Lead as you would like to be led. Be yourself but improve yourself, so that you can lead effectively. Take courses that teach effective communication, management, and leadership skills, but modify what you learn to conform to your own personal style and approach. Consider

advanced degrees, seminars, skill development, and continuing education. People come to leaders for answers, so be prepared to have those answers. But also have tough skin. Be ready for criticism and back-biting (even from women), and learn from it. Accept constructive criticism and put those words into action. But do not let others take advantage of you or try to derail you from your goals. Fight against truly unwarranted criticisms by making sure the true and accurate facts are known by those who matter. Finally, if you expect loyalty, you have to be completely loyal to those who support you. Be loyal to those in power and those with influence who can help you succeed. In addition, be loyal to those below you. They will have your back. Loyalty is not a matter of convenience. It is what gets you to your goals.

Develop your subordinates and lead by example. Provide the attorneys and staff that you supervise with appropriate opportunities. As they develop their own skills, they will make you look better, and they will make your job easier. Take time to teach, listen, and understand. Instill confidence in your team and inspire them to be the best. Moreover, have confidence—do not be afraid of a superstar subordinate. Nurture that person and bring other superstars into the group. Do not think that surrounding yourself with mediocrity will make you appear to be the best and strongest. The opposite will happen. A top-performing team will help take you to the next level.

Hold your subordinates to high standards, and make sure you hold yourself to those same standards. Be ready to take risks. Treading water and taking the conservative route every time is not going to get you where you want to be. But be thoughtful about your risks; evaluate them and be comfortable and confident with your decisions. You may make a poor choice or an unfortunate decision. Accept responsibility, learn from it, and move on.

Remember to Have a Life

Finally, never forget that happy, well-rounded people make better leaders. Involvement outside the office with family, friends, charities, hobbies, and the broader community all help to make you a more well-rounded person. Be comfortable engaging in conversations about family, books, sports, government, and current events. Take the time to go to an entertainment event, read the newspaper, or read a new book. Make time for family and friends. While there will be times when work comes first, there will also be times when family matters more. Embrace both moments. They are not mutually exclusive.

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