

There Isn't One Path to Success

By Jane DiRenzo Pigott

In a panel discussion (which included the first woman Supreme Court Justice and the first woman Solicitor General) entitled “Women Advocates of the Supreme Court Bar” held in Washington, DC at the end of January 2010, one panelist remarked that women still have to work “six times harder” and another panelist cautioned that if a woman wants to succeed, she should avoid “alternative tracks” such as utilizing a reduced schedule. (Note: it was neither of the women mentioned in the first parenthetical who made these comments.) I do not agree with either of these views. Women attorneys can succeed *and* define success in terms that personally work for them with regard to the path they will take and the timing of reaching significant milestones.

First, a women attorney needs to know what she wants. Only when she has an articulated goal can she put together a gameplan to get what she wants. It takes more than billable hours and high quality work to succeed. It also requires an acknowledgement that she has priorities outside of work. In addition to sitting in her office exceeding all stated expectations, she needs to strategically put together a plan of attack and then intentionally implement the plan.

Sounds easy, but if that is so, why are there panels like the one I describe above lamenting the dearth of women Supreme Court experts? I think part of the answer is that a woman attorney expects to succeed if (1) she keeps her head down, (2) does whatever assignments come in the door, and (3) efficiently does her work and then runs out the door to cover her other priorities. Unfortunately, the traits I just described merely allow her to survive; they do not entitle her to succeed. Success requires a different set of traits. Here is the contrast:

- (1) Instead of keeping her head down, she must be willing to tell the right people about what she is doing and communicate in a manner that is consistent with the culture of her organization.
- (2) Instead of waiting for someone to call her with an assignment, she must do the necessary due diligence to figure out who she needs to work with and what skill building assignments are necessary. She then must figure out how to access those assignments, which, in addition to the due diligence, will also require her to position herself to get what she wants by building credibility and trust.

- (3) In addition to efficiently doing her work, she needs to invest time in creating social capital (relationships where she can establish credibility and trust) within her organization. Ultimately, who “knows” her is as important, if not more important, than her substantive legal skill if her goal is accessing what she wants (a certain kind of work, a certain kind of modeling opportunities, mentoring, promotions, client relationships, etc.).

Creating a strategic gameplan and intentionally implementing it allows her to maximize her return on investment on the time she spends at work.

Second, I want to address the comment about the impact of working a reduced schedule. Not every woman chooses to utilize access to this type of career flexibility, but every woman should have a choice to do so that does not cause her to choose between career success and her other personal priorities. No one gets more than 24 hours in a day. Balancing priorities is a very personal choice and one that changes from time to time. Forcing people to continually choose between their priorities results in attrition. Consequently, organizations should provide the possibility for their attorneys to have multiple priorities. To do so, there cannot be only one path that leads to success.

Working a reduced schedule does not indicate a lack of commitment; it just indicates that, at that point in time, she cannot work full time and fulfill all of her priorities in a manner that she finds acceptable. Therefore, working a reduced schedule should not prevent a woman from getting what she wants out of her career. The path to career success cannot be so rigid that only those working full time remain “on track.” While working a reduced schedule may impact the timing of her progress, it should not eliminate her from being on a path to success. I am not postulating a whole new paradigm; I am just articulating a paradigm that exists in a growing number of law firms.

What can be done to increase the number of women who are Supreme Court experts (the question that this panel was convened to discuss)? We can have panels like the one that prompted this article lay out more clearly the many potential road maps to succeeding so that women have more models to use in creating their personal gameplans. Then we can hope that the women who have been successful enough to serve on these kinds of panels will be available to assist other women as they implement their gameplans.