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Law firm leaders have failed. A leader's principal responsibility is to preserve and optimize the law firm's resources, including its most important resource, legal talent. But for decades, leaders have allowed their firms to squander this resource. Women comprise a third of lawyers and have been entering law firms at the same rate of men since the 1980's. Yet the number of women equity partners seems to be locked at 15% and the percentage of women in leadership and top compensation rungs has not moved beyond single digits. Law firm leaders have wasted an enormous amount of female talent. It is time for them to accept the responsibility for changing the systems and culture that perpetuate male dominance to the detriment of women.

Sheryl Sandberg's new book, *Lean In*, encourages women to embrace their ambitions and strive with vigor and determination for the highest levels of success. That's excellent advice, especially for young women starting their careers. But what about the women who have been working hard, doing all the things Sandberg emphasizes yet find that their efforts are unrecognized, unappreciated and unrewarded? And what happens when the young women who heed Sandberg's call find their ambitions similarly thwarted?

Women lawyers have been leaning in for decades, but they topple over from the lack of institutional support. When firms do not hold up their end, women spend so much extra energy trying to maintain their balance that they become discouraged and exhausted. They scale back their ambitions or they leave. Some struggle on but hardly any make it into the inner circles of power and leadership. Consequently, the voices of women are unheard at all levels of power and leadership and play virtually no role in setting the direction of law firms.

Changing the dominant culture requires leaders with vision, determination and courage who will “lean in” and use their power, influence and political capital to produce gender balance. These leaders will have to make a compelling case for change; advocate for new decision-making processes that mandate and reward new behaviors; and enlist supporters to act in line with their new vision.

Shift the paradigm

Law firms that want women to succeed have taken constructive steps in that direction, mostly through maternity leave, part-time options, and other work-life policies. They have also sponsored networking activities and business development training for women. All of these actions are welcome and have produced significant benefits. But they put the burden of change on women while giving them no power to change anything but themselves. And they are based on a premise that in order to succeed, women must adapt to the prevailing masculine norms of the law firm.

Those initiatives serve as distractions from the real problem: the underlying belief that the law firm will continue to be a “man's world.” That belief is wrong. The world that current law firm leaders grew up in no longer exists. Law practice is being completely transformed. The revolutionary changes, complexities and globalization of law and business require leaders to have different skills, behaviors and styles of thinking. The leaders of the past, chosen for their rainmaking power, client portfolio or political influence in the firm, no longer have sufficient credentials to meet the needs of the future.

Law firms need to learn how to leverage women's talents, styles and perspectives for positive business results. Those that ignore this new world and try to maintain the masculine culture of the past will be ill equipped to compete and succeed in the future. The sheer number of women in business, especially those who are corporate decision-makers and consumers of legal services, will ineluctably impact clients' choice of counsel. Modern clients expect outside counsel to demonstrate greater versatility and diversity in personnel, intelligence and leadership. And increasingly, they expect to see women leading their work teams, business relationships, and the firm. Many of the challenges presented by these new market changes and client expectations play to women's strengths and require women's participation.

It is time to retire the notion of a “man's world” and instead create a world of practice where all lawyers, women as well as men, are valued for their unique as well as shared talents, and given an equal chance to succeed.

Few leaders have made a genuine effort to change law firm culture in order to stem the attrition of women and increase women's leadership representation and compensation. Whether lacking the will or the ability, they have not articulated either a vision or a business case for change. The people they have to persuade are the men who comprise 85% of equity partners, and who have flourished in the system as it is. Why should those men care about change? What's in it for them? Until leaders persuade the men who currently hold power that they will benefit from a future that includes larger numbers of successful and powerful women, current values and systems will continue to favor men.

Changing culture is not easy. A firm's culture consists of accepted behavioral norms and the shared underlying values that keep those norms in place. And because they control almost all sources of power in law firms, men set the rules, create the norms and define the expectations for how leaders should look, act and behave. Changing such a strongly embedded culture requires courageous leaders who accept that challenge because they know the future of the firm depends on it.

What must current leaders do to create a law firm culture where women as well as men have an equal chance of success? Here are some starting points.

- **Accept the responsibility for leading change.** You have been entrusted to lead and advocate for the best interests of all the firm's lawyers, women and men.
- **Articulate a vision of a better future.** Help others envision a firm that thrives and succeeds because it appreciates, optimizes and rewards the talents and dedication of all its lawyers. Make your vision positive, but explain why the firm will not remain competitive, intelligent or relevant in the new legal marketplace, and why it will have trouble attracting clients and recruiting top talent, without more women leaders. Enlist their commitment and active support for the vision.
- **Educate yourself.** You can't persuade others of your vision unless you genuinely believe it and can make a strong case for it. Stay up to date on trends in the business world and legal profession that support your vision. Study the ample research that shows the quantifiable benefits of having more women in leadership; the changing expectations of clients about the lawyers they work with; the skills that law firm leaders will need in the future; and the strengths that women bring to leadership.
- **Educate other leaders.** Keep the firm informed about trends in law and business that support the need for gender balance and what they can do to promote it. Educate all lawyers, and especially law firm leaders, about unconscious gender bias and how to stop it. Watch out for evidence of it. For example, in a recent discussion of leadership succession on LinkedIn, a consultant remarked, "You then work towards planning for the next managing Partner and you choose the best man for the job." If you hear comments like those, correct the speaker.
- **Hold yourself and others accountable.** It is not enough to say the firm is making the advancement of women a top priority. Set specific targets for women in various categories and roles (e.g., number of practice group leaders or newly elevated partners). Set realistic dates for short- and long-term goals. Make your goals and targets public. Create an outside, public board of community leaders (including clients) to monitor your progress. Issue reminders and regular reports to the firm and the public about what is being done to advance women and the results to date. Tie partners' compensation to their efforts to retain and advance women.
- **Eliminate systemic barriers.** When determining what must be done to achieve your targets, consider what systemic barriers currently exist and need to be eliminated. Look for signs of gender bias or differential impact on women in all decision making processes that affect lawyers' professional development and advancement, including work assignments, performance evaluations, partnership elevation, sponsorship, business development opportunities, client contact, compensation, client transitions, and leadership selection. In each process, analyze any disparities between the impact on women and men in the firm, and advocate for changes that will remedy all signs of unfairness.
- **Challenge assumptions, especially if they reflect old ways of thinking.** Change requires challenging and replacing prevailing orthodoxies. Law firms have long accepted as "normal" certain work practices and career trajectories that must be reshaped, especially with regard to how lawyers view time. For example, most firms believe that lawyers must devote most of their time and life to work, and they measure lawyers'

value based largely on how many hours they bill. But many firms today are starting to focus on project management and increasing efficiencies. They are learning how to disaggregate and rearrange legal work to meet client demands. This is an excellent time to rethink the firm's time norms, i.e., its assumptions and expectations about how much time lawyers should spend at work. A four-year study of consultants at the Boston Consulting Group completely upset the assumption that high-powered consultants had to be available and at work 24/7 in order to provide high quality client service. The study found that requiring every team member to take a day off from work each week led to better communication, greater work efficiency, and overall, better work product. Knowing that people would be away from work every week forced teams to plan work better and communicate more often, and forced individuals to be more efficient and focused on their work. Why wouldn't the same findings apply to law firms?

- **Groom women for leadership.** If you want more women, groom the ones you have and recruit others to supplement the ranks. Make sure that women are offered high-profile work, leadership and client opportunities, and are encouraged to accept them; that they are sponsored to the same degree as men; and that their work and client experience is increasing their development and engagement. Identify specific, objective factors that demonstrate leadership ability, readiness, and potential, and use those criteria to identify candidates for leadership roles. Nominate and appoint women to leadership positions. Show women the career possibilities they can expect at the firm. Talk with them about what they want and need in their careers to become successful, and help them get it. Recruit women lawyers from government, academia and other fields as well as from other law firms, and give them the support they need to make a good transition. Reach out through your alumni network to women who have left the firm but might want to return.
- **Network with women.** Many firms sponsor networking events by and for women. It is very important for women lawyers to build networks with other women who are becoming leaders in business and corporate law departments, and the numbers of such women are growing fast. But most power-holders and decision-makers in the firm and in the business world today are still men, and women need to network with them too. While young women are attending panel discussions, teas and programs with other women on their way up, male partners are taking male associates and junior partners with them to events where they network with influential men who can help them with business or sponsorship today. Be sure that in your firm, men interact with women and bring women to business, client and professional events, just as readily as they do with men.

These steps will start law firm leaders on the right track to initiating the institutional and cultural changes needed to develop and retain women lawyers. When women and law firm leaders all lean in together, they can support each other's efforts and build a stronger, more gender balanced firm.

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