

WBAI: Promoting women leaders in the law

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By Deane B. Brown

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As the incoming president of the Women's Bar Association of Illinois and a lawyer in private practice for more than 20 years, I believe the WBAI has a compelling obligation to help as many women as possible to succeed in the legal profession.

We have all heard the statistics. The number of women graduating from law schools in our country is either equal to or greater than the number of men, yet if we look at the number of partners in law firms across the nation, women are greatly outnumbered by men. The annual survey of the American Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession demonstrates that for the past three years, women have comprised only 18 percent of equity partners nationwide.

Unfortunately, all of us know many women who have left the profession for various reasons — they couldn't achieve a work-life balance; they weren't receiving the "plum" case assignments; they didn't bring in enough business or have their own clients; they weren't lucky enough to inherit work from a retiring partner; or there were no women serving as role models and mentors, telling them, "I can do it, so can you."

Whatever the reason for women leaving the law, it remains a persistent issue that must be addressed. It is time for the WBAI to step up to the plate. To that end, the WBAI's theme for the 2011-2012 bar year is "Promoting Women Leaders in the Legal Community."

The WBAI will feature programming over the next 12 months to give women attorneys in both the public and private sector the skills they need not only to stay in the profession, but to become leaders in the profession. More often than not, the two go hand-in-hand.

Whether it is becoming a supervisor in the state's attorney's office, a partner in a law firm, general counsel for a corporation or a judge, all of these positions share one thing in common: They are positions of leadership.

Most leaders in the legal community will tell you that they are strong networkers. Effective networking can help you find a job, build your reputation and develop a book of business. Yet many female lawyers (and males ones) struggle with how to network.

Collecting a stack of business cards at an event that will then be stuffed into your desk drawer is not effective networking, nor is handing out your business card to everyone you meet.

Instead, an effective networker takes the time to get to know only a few people at an event, learn about their business, ask them what you can do for them (not vice versa) and then follow up with them for coffee or lunch to begin to develop a relationship with them.

To help women lawyers with this crucial skill, the WBAI will present a program on Sept. 8 hosted by Winston & Strawn LLP, which will feature Tracy LaLonde, a partner with Akina Corp., on how to network effectively. LaLonde has consulted with law firms around the country on business development and has helped attorneys develop sustainable skills in the areas of leadership, communication and "rainmaking."

Strong women role models are also critical to the retention and advancement of women in the legal profession. If a young woman associate looks around her law firm and sees nothing but senior male partners, she may be discouraged about her chances for promotion.

If that young attorney, however, is lucky enough to work at one of the large Chicago law firms run by a female managing partner who is also a working mother, her outlook may brighten considerably.

To that end, the WBAI will offer a program on Oct. 20 hosted by Jenner & Block LLP, which will feature three female managing partners: [Nancy S. Gerrie](#), partner in charge of McDermott, Will & Emery LLP in Chicago; [Jennifer A. Kenedy](#), managing partner of Locke, Lord, Bissell & Liddell LLP's Chicago office; and [Susan C. Levy](#), managing partner of Jenner & Block.

These women will speak about how they rose to the top of their law firms; how they have achieved a work-life balance; what they look for when promoting an associate to partner; and how women can succeed in a law firm environment.

The WBAI is busy planning a number of other leadership and business development programs for 2012, including a panel discussion by women general counsel, who will speak about client relationship skills as well as what they look for when hiring outside counsel.

Additionally, the WBAI expects to present a program featuring female leaders of the ABA, the Chicago Bar Association and the Illinois State Bar Association on the importance of leadership in bar organizations to career development.

The WBAI will also be hosting events with dynamic women leaders in the public sector. Cook County State's Attorney [Anita M. Alvarez](#) is expected to speak at such a program along with other elected female leaders. The WBAI is also planning a panel discussion of female judges in state and federal courts in Illinois, who will discuss their career paths to the judiciary.

Although women attorneys have certainly come a long way since the founding of the WBAI in 1914, we still have a long way to go.

It is my fervent hope that the programming to be offered by the WBAI throughout the next year will offer female lawyers the inspiration, motivation and skills they need not only to continue practicing law but to advance to positions of leadership in the legal profession.