

## **Lack of Self-Promotion Hurts Women in Large Firms**

*By Patricia Gillette*

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Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz. She's probably not the first person to come to mind if I asked you to name a female leader. Yet, think about it, Dorothy was a true leader. She identified the tasks at hand, formulated a plan, and overcame obstacles to reach her goals: a brain for the scarecrow, a heart for the tin man, and courage for the cowardly lion.

But when push came to shove, what did Dorothy ultimately ask for herself from the Wizard? Nothing. Instead, she preempted his attempt to even try to reward her, thereby letting the Wizard off the hook.

Some might say Dorothy's behavior represents the stereotypical female leader. She builds teams. She encourages collaboration and consensus. She reaches resolution efficiently. And, at the end of the day, she asks for no credit, no reward, no recognition. And thus, no one knows what she has done and no one thinks of her as a leader.

No question, this lack of self-promotion plays out in law firms, and it does so to the detriment of women. Look no further than the statistics that have plagued our profession for years as proof of this: just 2 percent of the chairs of major law firms are women, 19 percent of the partners at large law firms are women. Here and there you find the token "woman's seat" on the executive committee.

Are men in law firms really so much more qualified than the women in those firms to hold the majority of the leadership positions? Are men in law firms really so much better at developing business that they should have the largest books? Of course they're not. What men still have, in part due to the lack of female partners and the exodus of women from law firms, is the power to decide who gets the nod for new opportunities and who doesn't. In fact, if truth be told, the old boys' club, unconscious bias, and outright resentment of women who ask for business or leadership opportunities are all alive and well in many law firms.

While it's easy--and fair--to point a finger at all these factors, however, women have played some part in creating the current situation by following the Dorothy model of "don't ask and don't tell." Many women don't ask for business and career opportunities, for leadership positions, for chances to strut our stuff. Correspondingly, many women don't tell (read: acknowledge their wins) when they are successful. Instead, women tend to wait for the recognition and reward--a wait that can last a career. This is not the sole reason or even the primary reason for the lack of women in positions of power, but it is a contributor.

So how can we break the barriers that hold women back from positions of power in law firms? First, we have to acknowledge that power in law firms is defined by meaningful leadership positions and books of business, and that it is time for us to demand that firms change the traditional ways in which that power is transferred. This starts by mandating training in what

constitutes "unconscious bias" for all partners and associates. Men and women must be willing to acknowledge that they are not innocent bystanders or that they are free from hidden prejudices.

These steps should be followed by changes to the formal and informal systems that have traditionally held women (and some men) back, including:

- Instituting a formal process for identifying and promoting candidates of both genders for leadership positions.
- Setting percentage goals for meaningful leadership positions so that there is greater diversity at the true governing levels in law firms
- Identifying the characteristics of successful partners and leaders so that women (and men who are not "connected" to power sources within the firm) understand what it takes to be successful in the culture of their firm (i.e. books of business, managing teams, practice group status within the firm, management skills, who you know).
- Creating formal job descriptions for leadership positions that describe the roles and the qualifications for leadership positions.
- Insisting on formal succession planning for long-term client relationships.
- Formally and publicly monitoring (and measuring) who is chosen to go on client pitches and who works on matters that result from those pitches.
- Requiring a systemized and monitored approach to assignments for significant matters.
- Rewarding partners for bringing new attorneys into client relationships and for promoting diverse teams.

Second, women have to take a more active role in managing and advancing their own careers by:

- Coming into law firms with a career plan.
- Expressing interest early in their careers for firm leadership positions
- Actively engaging with leaders in the firm--setting up lunches or meetings with firm leaders, inviting them to events, getting to know them so they know you.
- Using women's initiatives to pressure firms into expanding leadership and opportunities within the firm and with clients for women.
- Taking leadership roles outside the firm in bar associations, industry groups, and on boards.
- Advising superiors of one's leadership capabilities and achievements.

- Asking to be included in client pitches.
- Affirmatively courting clients, particularly women in leadership positions at clients.
- Developing a reputation in practice areas through writing, speaking and appearing at client events.
- Promoting other women to the powers that be in the firm.

Simply put, firms have to commit publicly to making leadership and client opportunities available to all qualified attorneys, and eliminating the "token" women spots that firms use to show they are diverse. And women need to ask for opportunities. We have to say to the Wizard, "since you are leaving town in that balloon, how about I take over as Queen of Oz." But, of course, we should keep the ruby red slippers--because there is nothing wrong with a leader who has some style.



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