

DICTA

Death by Committee

Is this month's women's initiative meeting worth your time?

By Denise Howell

IT'S TIME. THE WOMEN'S INITIATIVE meeting is getting started. You carry your salad and soda down to the small conference room and exchange pleasantries. On today's agenda: a lawyer-client golf outing; a client development seminar; mentor assignments for incoming associates; and an upcoming cocktail mixer with the legal staff of a Fortune 50 company that insists its law firms demonstrate more diversity.

Looking around the table, you note that the usual attendees are here:

- The of counsel back from her three-month maternity leave. Between the law school loans and the mortgage, taking more time off, unpaid, wasn't an option. She'll be ducking out soon for an awkward encounter with her breast pump.
- The equity partner with two school-age children and a live-in nanny. She has pictures of the kids in her office but otherwise rarely sees them during daylight on weekdays. On weekends, it's fifty-fifty.
- The childless, fortysomething nonequity partner, on a break from her fourth deposition that week.
- The committee chair, present as a tinny voice emitting from the plastic starfish on the table. Her business clout has earned her a small suite in an office park near her suburban home. Still, she doesn't see her kids much; her husband retired to become the go-to parent.
- There are no men in the room, and just one or two on the firmwide videoconference.

The chair wraps things up quickly; she has to get on a plane. On the way back to your office, you evaluate the meeting. The equity and nonequity partners—good team players—seem happy. The of counsel is

clearly sleep-deprived; she could well hospitalize someone if permitted to wield a 9-iron. The associate is probably looking forward to meeting an actual client (not to mention having a couple of actual drinks). And you? You've just squandered another nonbillable hour in another firm meeting that was more about getting dollars in the door than it was about spending dollars in a way that will keep women at the firm, equalize their pay, and—hopefully, ultimately—boost their leadership profile.

It's hard to escape women's initiatives and committees. After all, almost every big firm has one. But they may do more harm than good. "I get concerned about programs that don't accomplish things and wind up being an object of ridicule," says Holly English, president of the National Association of Women Lawyers (NAWL) and counsel with Post, Polak, Goodsell, MacNeill & Strauchler in Roseland, New Jersey. Unless a firm is committed to achieving and charting results—in areas like the percentage of women retained, how many make equity and nonequity partner and in what time frame, the extent to which "of counsel" is shorthand for a no-advancement career ghetto, and disparate income and management representation—a women's initiative is more show than substance. "In a way it's almost better not to embark on something like this unless you're committed to the results," says English.

I want to believe in women's initiatives and committees. But it's hard not to be jaded. Women equity partners are holding firm at about 15 percent. The income numbers, meanwhile, are moving further apart, with partner-level men making anywhere from \$20,000 to \$140,000 more on average than their female counterparts.

And while women may have a seat at the table when the women's committee meets, they are largely, if not totally, shut out of management committee meetings. Only 8 percent of managing partners are women and, on average, only 15 percent of the seats on most firms' governing committees are filled by women. (All numbers are from NAWL.)

I tend to think women's initiatives attempt too little, limiting themselves to encouraging women to be like men, at least the ones we think of as traditionally successful lawyers. Hone your skills, bring in clients, find 56 productive hours in each diurnal cycle, and the keys to the kingdom will be yours. This approach ignores so-called lifestyle issues that transcend gender lines and bar lawyers from achieving success on unconventional paths, at least at big firms.

I'm not ready to give up on women's initiatives, but I am still waiting for a firm to step up and show they can be more than mere window dressing. One way to accomplish that: Appoint a Women's Czar, a top management member whose job is to ensure that women come to the firm, stay there, and participate meaningfully in running it, and whose compensation—and job security—rises and falls on statistics related to those goals. Until then, I'm sure you can find better things to do with your time than attend next month's committee meeting.

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