

## 10 New Year's Resolutions To Boost Firm Gender Diversity

*Law360, New York (January 01, 2014, 10:09 AM ET)* -- Gender diversity is an important goal for law firms in 2014 and beyond. It is widely recognized in the U.S. that diversity is a business imperative as clients see the benefits of diverse legal teams and increasingly demand diversity from their outside legal service providers. Yet the numbers of women in law firms (especially in the partnership ranks) lag the good intentions and the business imperative. How can we move the needle? It takes effort from all of us in law firms, every day.

If you are a woman, like it or not, we are all role models for other women in our law firms. In the workplace, women naturally look to others who “look like us” to see how they do it. If you are a man, recognize that you may be more inherently inclined to interact professionally and socially with other men, and that can have a subtle disadvantageous affect on women at your firm. There are simply not as many female role models as men at most law firms, and women need formal and informal professional development opportunities with men too, in order to be successful.

There is much talk of women “leaning in” to their careers these days, but it also helps if those of us who work with women can “reach out” and provide a platform for their success. Sometimes all it takes is keeping diversity top of mind when you market, recruit, mentor, staff matters and develop business throughout the year.

With that in mind — here are 10 New Year’s resolutions to improve the retention and promotion of women at your law firm and improve your gender diversity over time:

### ***1. Get to know the women you work with better.***

Look at the team of attorneys you work with and ask yourself if you know everyone equally well. If you are a man, do you tend to know more about the men? Do you know more about their families, favorite sports teams, hobbies, etc? If you find you don’t know as much about a woman (or a man) on the team, invite the attorney to lunch or coffee in order to learn more about her or him. That can help make an employee feel more connected and loyal to the firm.

### ***2. Offer to talk to a female associate about her business plan/career.***

Sometimes women are more hesitant than men to ask for input on career prospects or ask for career advice. Pick one or two female associates this year and plan a meeting to discuss their career path and goals and how you can help. It may be as simple as assisting with a business plan, or making suggestions about who a woman should meet or work with in order to best position herself for promotion or business development.

### ***3. Work with female lawyers you haven't worked with before.***

We all have teams of attorneys who we love to work with because we know them and they do great work. But if we work with the same people over and over again, it is a vicious cycle for those who don't get the steady flow of good assignments and experience. Look around your firm/group/practice and identify a few women who you haven't worked with and give them opportunities on some new matters this year. Do you know a woman coming back from maternity leave? That can be a great time to catch a woman with some room on her professional plate, and help her get ramped back up.

### ***4. Take a few female associates to client events or networking events throughout the year.***

Getting experience at these types of functions is an important step to becoming a good networker and business developer. They can be uncomfortable or downright terrifying for associates at first. It takes practice and is helpful for more junior colleagues to see you in action in order to develop a comfort level and their own networking style. Introduce them to people and share tips on how best to follow up with people they meet.

### ***5. Make sure your pitch teams are diverse.***

Most clients are looking closely at the makeup of their outside counsels' teams, and that starts in pitches. When you have some influence in which attorneys are going to pitches, look at the team and make sure it demonstrates a diverse mix. No tokens though — only involve women who have the right substantive practice and experience to participate in the work if you get it. And if you are having problems finding those people — then clearly time needs to be invested in training a diverse team. Research your clients' diversity policies in advance so you can speak to that in pitches too.

### ***6. Publicize the great work of your female colleagues.***

Stereotypically, women can be less likely than men to brag. If a female colleague has a success, let others know, either through word-of-mouth or a strategic email to the right people. This gives credit where credit is due, and also creates a great atmosphere of trust and loyalty. Additionally, when you support others like this, they will have your back too.

### ***7. Write or present with a female associate.***

Sometimes it is challenging — especially for junior attorneys — to get an opportunity to speak at a conference or write a bylined article. These things take practice, and are important skills in building a practice and a brand. Offer an opportunity to a qualified woman to assist you in one of these efforts, and make sure she gets the credit as a co-presenter or co-author.

### ***8. Ask questions about personal restrictions; don't make assumptions.***

Certain topics can feel uncomfortable to discuss at the office — like restrictions on work/travel during pregnancy or while breast-feeding or taking care of young kids. It can be easier to make assumptions and avoid these topics than inquire about the facts. But you may be taking away an opportunity from a woman that she would choose not to give up. Initiate an open and honest discussion and just ask the questions.

For example: “I’d like you to go on this pitch next week in New York, but I want to be sensitive about your pregnancy/young baby — are you ok to travel right now and are you interested in doing it?” Most women will be glad you acknowledged the challenge as it will give her a graceful opening to say no if she just can’t do it, and will allow her to take advantage of the opportunity if she can. Either way, she is likely to be pleased to know you wanted her to do this.

**9. Keep diversity in mind in recruiting.**

Make sure female candidates are meeting with a variety of attorneys at your firm, including women. For female recruits, it can seem like a firm isn’t a good fit if they don’t see other women when they visit. On the flip side, if you have a women’s initiatives committee, ask members to assist with recruiting. If women hear about the extra things your firm does to attract and retain women, it may make them feel more comfortable about choosing you over a competitor.

**10. Recommend a woman for a leadership position inside or outside of the firm.**

Once you achieve visibility within your firm or your community, you may be asked to recommend others for leadership opportunities — a committee or board position, a speaking engagement, a task force or a training program. When you make those recommendations, keep diversity in mind — these can be great stepping stones for even higher-level leadership positions. And when women are in leadership positions, they naturally become role models for other women — a positive cycle — for 2014 and beyond!

—By Joanna K. Horsnail, Mayer Brown LLP

*Joanna Horsnail is a partner in Mayer Brown’s Chicago office where she specializes in construction and infrastructure transactions. She serves as chairwoman of the firm’s global women’s leadership committee.*

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