

COVERSTORY

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING MENTORED

Organic mentorships help women attorneys on path to partner



By ADINA GENN

There's a reason there are so few women in top management in the law field, and its origin may well take root early in the career ladder.

But a group of seasoned attorneys, on Long Island and elsewhere across the county, are seeking to put to an end to that phenomenon with a powerful tool: Mentorship.

For women in the legal field, mentorship can mean the difference in a rewarding career at a law firm and a less lucrative in-house legal position or government post – stints that are perceived to offer better work-life balance, experts said.

A good mentor can be a lifeline to attorneys angling to get ahead while also juggling family responsibilities or even just starting out in the field. Without realizing it, they can miss out on client meetings and depositions – the kinds of rainmaking career boosters that can lead to making partner at a firm.

"It's hard for women to get those leadership roles even at firms where they want women," said Judi Abbott Curry, a member in the Uniondale office of Harris Beach.

Other attorneys shared that sentiment. "We need to teach people how to" stay on the partner track, said Jennifer Hillman, a partner at Ruskin Moscou Faltischek in Uniondale, concentrating in trusts and estates. Mentors guide the way by saying "This is what you do to step in. This is how you position yourself."

Despite some practice's efforts to incorporate gender equity at their firms, just 46 percent of law firm associates are women, while 30 percent of non-equity partners and 19 percent of equity partners are women. That's according to a 2017 report



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by the National Association of Women Lawyers.

That same study pointed out that a majority of firms surveyed have put forth women's initiatives, with mentorship playing a big role in career paths, making inroads up the chain to partner.

That kind of support is key, according to a recent leadership roundtable organized by Long Island Business News, where law firm sponsors shared their big picture view of obstacles for women attorneys. Still, in the age of the #MeToo movement, men might give pause about mentoring a woman, concerned about the optics.

Yet there are benefits to increasing the number of women partners at a law firm,



ANNAMARIE BONDI-STODDARD: 'Mentorship is very important.'

including boosting its diversity, which can enable a practice to better address client needs, several attorneys said. In addition, the boost can help pay equity among male and female attorneys.

Still, the pressures for women who are attorneys can be overwhelming.

"There's a big attrition rate with women leaving [firms] because of work-life imbalance," said Lesley Reardon, a partner at Rosenberg Calica & Birney in Garden City.

"It's a difficult way to make a living for women who balance tug-of-war issues between the office and home," Reardon added.

Mentorships, attorneys said, can help keep women on the partner track.

"Mentorship is very important," said



LESLEY REARDON: 'There's a big attrition rate with women leaving [firms] because of work-life imbalance.'

Annamarie Bondi-Stoddard, managing partner of Pegalis & Erickson, a Lake Success-based law firm that focuses on plaintiffs in medical malpractice cases. "What a student learns in law school doesn't mirror a workplace environment, so acquiring the nuts and bolts knowledge of practicing law and what you need to do to succeed in this profession, is well-suited to being mentored."

Bondi-Stoddard said she has mentored "both men and women during my 30-plus years managing a law firm. Some of the mentees went on to become successful attorneys here, and some moved on to be successful at other law firms."

A mentor can steer attorneys to get on committees, to agree to take on cases even