

CLIMBING THE WALL: A CASE FOR WORKING WOMEN TO WORK TOGETHER

Association of Women Lawyers of Greater Kansas City Newsletter

It goes without saying that women in the legal profession (any profession, really) should support each other – both personally and professionally. While the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly tested women in multiple ways, it appears to have forged greater support networks among women, with greater empathy and authenticity among them as well. From solo practitioners to public service attorneys to large law firms and in-house counsel, the value and importance of a female-driven support network (or networks to encompass all facets life) cannot be overstated. As with all networks and relationships though, they need to be intentionally cultured and cultivated for sustainability. Below are ways that female employees of Armstrong Teasdale have found their people, their strength and their support, even through the “virtual reality” of the COVID-19 pandemic, to survive and thrive. Sharing what works is just as important as knowing what works, so that other women, firms and organizations can explore, brainstorm and create ways to further initiatives that make women feel supported.

Giving Back: If you’ve ever read the book “How to Win Friends & Influence People,” you know that honest and sincere appreciation is a core principle. At the firm, women consistently show appreciation and their support to others not only in the office, but also in the broader community, through the firm’s Women’s Inclusion Network (WIN), an active resource group within the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Department.

As an example, in April, WIN hosted a firmwide charitable clothing drive. More than a dozen women, across firm offices, at all levels, served as WIN champions and clothing drive site leads to carry out this momentous effort. Many of the firm’s younger associates took the lead on this initiative and truly demonstrated the spirit of teamwork that is core to WIN. In Kansas City alone, the firm donated more than 100 men’s and women’s clothing items to Connections to Success, an organization that aims to break the cycle of poverty by helping people living in challenging situations re-establish hope, get connected with needed resources, and implement a plan to reach economic independence. Not only does the program foster personal, economic and social

PEOPLE

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strength, but also a sense of belonging.

In addition, the firm's Kansas City-based women lawyers have long been recognized for their contributions to the broader legal community. Partners Karrie Clinkinbeard and Bev Weber are among former classes of the Kansas City Business Journal's Women Who Mean Business and maintain active networking with next generation women leaders in the community. Most recently, Clinkinbeard, Weber and Associate Ebonie Davis earned recognition from Missouri Lawyers Weekly as part of their Women's Justice Awards program. There are endless opportunities to volunteer in the community. Find a cause you are passionate about. Grab a friend, co-worker, associate or mentor and be a part of something that improves the world around you with someone who fills your cup.

Fostering an Inclusive Culture: According to the 2019 EY Belonging Barometer, "[w]hile today's social climate has been associated with controversy and disagreements, it also seems to be banding people together in a more positive way – surprisingly at work." Their pre-pandemic study noted that 90% of women feel like they belong within their current workplace. Perhaps the Great Reshuffle is contributing even moreso today, as employees seem more deliberate in finding the right cultural fit – often one with flexibility, support and a strong sense of community amidst a hybrid work environment.

Although many of our attorneys continue to embrace a hybrid model, they still look to connect in person as frequently as possible. A number of women attorneys attended and sponsored the Women's Employment Network (WEN) Annual Luncheon in Kansas City to support WEN's 30+ years helping women in Kansas City on their journey toward financial independence. The event was an opportunity to showcase the firm's support in the community and discuss the organization's deliberate focus on perseverance – a quality many women credit with their success. Additionally, several attorneys from the Kansas City office attended Mentoring Monday, presented by the Kansas City Business Journal, with AT lawyers and mentors Beverly Weber and Karrie Clinkinbeard sponsoring multiple associates from the firm to participate in leadership development with some of Kansas City's most successful and prominent female business leaders.

"You have to believe in what you're doing and the people you work with," said Partner Crystal Howard. "When you believe in yourself, and the people you work with understand you, mutual respect grows, which creates a sense of belonging and confidence that can drive you to persevere in the face of challenges."

Taking responsibility for creating relationships to drive trust, support and mutual respect, whether through formal or informal mentorship and sponsorship in the workplace can be as simple as inviting someone to join you – to take part in an event, or a client matter, or even a conversation. Not only



does it promote inclusivity, but also mutual personal and professional success, and it can be incredibly rewarding for both the inviter and invitee. Be intentional and make the ask. Some women can't wait for that opportunity.

Supporting Each Other's Development: Listening is critical to understanding and advancement. At the end of each year, Armstrong Teasdale's women lawyers host a meeting of the minds and hash out their goals for the following year, fortifying the adage "say it, believe it, achieve it," to each other and to themselves. The visibility of different goals at all levels of practice presents an opportunity for mentorship and sponsorship within the firm. It helps women feel supported in their roles and encourages them to achieve – together.

"We know that operating in a vacuum doesn't work," said Partner Beverly Weber. "That's why in our client representations we bring diverse perspectives to the table so that we can advocate the most innovative solutions for our clients. And we want to, and do, invest the same energy and diversity to innovate into our own, and our peers', professional development."

While women in the legal profession may sometimes feel up against a wall, creating a shared sense of community through service, professional development and peer support has presented opportunities to climb higher together. Of course, success happens even for those who walk their paths alone. But sharing the journey, and all the highs and lows, with women who push and pull with you, may just be the not-so-secret secret to fulfilled success.