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Baker's Dozen – Tips and Insights on Partnering to Advance Women

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Well-established data shows that businesses with increased women leadership outperform less diverse leadership teams financially, culturally, and in client engagement. There is less information available, however, documenting practical actions for organizations to take in sponsoring, mentoring, and partnering with women to ensure measurable progress in advancement to ownership, leadership, and career success across all levels of an organization.

To develop a sustainable pipeline of gender diverse leaders, corporations must intentionally challenge and equip their existing leaders to undertake individualized sponsor and partner relationships to serve as a catalyst for cultural transformation and measurable progress. This includes engaging men with influence throughout the organization to participate in a consulting role to assist not only formal women's initiative and diversity and inclusion committee structures and initiatives, but also build a communication narrative to enable all colleagues, including men, to enter the dialogue and effort.

A sponsor is a person of influence in an organization who is willing to advocate for a protégé. Typically, the sponsor is an equity owner or leader who actively works on their protégé's behalf and advocates for their pathway to success. A sponsor, or effective partner, is a champion who promotes their protégé's interaction with signature clients, with other internal leaders, and their visibility in the community. This includes (i) expanding the perceptions of what their protégé can do, (ii) making connections to other internal leaders, (iii) promoting her visibility, (iv) opening career opportunities, (v) ensuring the protégé works with key clients; (vi) sharing positive feedback from clients about the protégé with other leadership; (vii) making connections outside the company, and (viii) giving career advice.

One practical tip that I have found beneficial over the years is to schedule recurring weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly 15- to 30-minute "coffee chats" with my protégé. During the early coffee discussions, I learn about their interests, goals, and aspirations. I then use subsequent meetings to map out and execute on opportunities to raise the protégé's visibility, including introductions to influential colleagues, introduction through meals or virtual meetings with clients, brand building, showcasing her expertise, talent, or knowledge to clients, and assisting with career trajectory plans, planning, and execution.

Here are 13 other practical tips from some of our men leaders at Baker Donelson on how you can help sponsor or partner with women in advancing their careers.

1. At some point I came to understand that, in light of the male-dominant culture of the legal profession, "mentoring" and "providing business opportunities" was not enough to level the playing field in terms of career advancement. I learned that the best way I can positively affect a woman's career advancement is to use my leadership position and my influence in the organization to *actively* advocate for women.

– Mark Glover, Shareholder, Memphis, Tennessee

2. Always try to remember that all our colleagues have rich, full, and important lives outside the office. Demands or expectations that overlook that fact are counterproductive in the long term and impose unacceptable costs on a business. This is particularly true with women, who still often carry a disproportionate share of duties in the home, family, school, and community. Work assignments, deadlines, and attitudes need to consider those other roles women may play and showcase respect for the full scope of our friends' and colleagues' lives, personal and professional.

– *Gary Shockley, Shareholder, Nashville, Tennessee*

3. I will offer to help them set up business development coaching if this is an area in which my women colleagues have indicated they want help. It's important to surrender your time for their use and actively look for opportunities to introduce your women colleagues to key clients. Be flexible and support parental leave and possible child-care arrangements for those who may be working moms.

– *Brad Chambers, Shareholder, Houston, Texas*

4. Set up a time to talk and make it clear that you are invested in helping their career. Be open about offering advice and your own personal experiences, ask about the other person's needs, and help craft a plan toward those needs. Be approachable and make the effort to reach out first. Don't be shy about continuing to be the first one to reach out and set up calls.

– *Rich Faulkner, Shareholder, Chattanooga, Tennessee*

5. For the last decade-plus, I have had a co-mentoring relationship with one of our women leaders. Over that time, I have received far more than I have given. We meet regularly and develop annual plans, which we revisit throughout the year. We share ideas, promote *each other*, and hold each other accountable. We also share brutally frank feedback, celebrate victories, and focus on motivating each other. We are each other's sounding board, and no topic is off limits – we trust each other.

– *Bruce Doeg, Shareholder, Nashville, Tennessee*

6. The bottom line is inclusion. Make sure women are included in client visits and meetings so they can get to know the client personally and the client can get to know them. In my opinion, making introductions and "opening the doors" for my colleagues is the best way to partner with folks to help them advance their careers.

– *Andy Rotenstreich, Shareholder, Birmingham, Alabama*

7. When there is the commitment to succeed, my advice is to give her the opportunity and the visibility and then stay out of the way!

– *Sandy Teplitzky, Shareholder, Baltimore, Maryland*

8. I try to be involved in the earliest stages of client engagement so the client knows my highest level of confidence in every member on my team. This approach requires letting the colleague know that my

involvement is not intended to be anything other than transitional at the outset of a client introduction. It also is important to let my team members know that I am available if any "sticky situations" occur. The goal is to make the colleague confident that you have her back, but that she is not on an island. Ideally, more business will flow directly to the colleague in an organic way.

– *John McJunkin, Shareholder, Washington D.C.*

9. Make sure to openly share any information that may have circulated at the golf course with a client.

– *Bruce McMullen, Shareholder, Memphis, Tennessee*

10. People develop and succeed most when given the opportunity to do so. Those opportunities involve much more than simply observing more senior colleagues at work with clients, but also taking the lead on face-to-face meetings, strategy sessions, and proposals. Women attorneys quickly rise to the occasion for success when given the opportunity to take the lead in client meetings, whether that is through steering the agenda, speaking up on issues of importance, or explaining our rationale for the recommendations we have suggested.

– *Steve Griffith, Shareholder, New Orleans, Louisiana*

11. I have consistently found that identifying a common interest is key to advancing success with women colleagues and clients. Sometimes that commonality is a shared professional goal but often it is something entirely unrelated to a career that allows us to forge a relationship that leads to success for both of us. It takes effort to find that common ground, but once you do, it can last for years and create a catalyst for growth.

– *Eric Pruitt, Shareholder, Birmingham, Alabama*

12. Unfortunately, there can often be an imbalance of power in the workplace due to gender bias. When working on a client team or effort, it's important to start out by asking all team members if there are any scheduling issues that need to be considered or other requests about how the work will be managed. You can't predict everything, and if you don't ask, you'll miss something. Women can bring a different perspective about a project to the team, but if the quarterback takes the time on the front end to analyze the team's needs, then everyone will play better.

– *Jonathan Hancock, Shareholder, Memphis, Tennessee*

13. Over the years, I have worked closely with women colleagues who were my go-to teammates. We shared the work and client relationships. On several occasions, my woman colleague needed to make a work schedule change due to family obligations. We were able to adjust how we worked together, such as a new schedule, new work location, or new allocation of work. That approach has succeeded time and time again. My teammate wins, I win, the client wins.

– *Rusty Gray, Chattanooga, Tennessee*

There is no secret formula for a successful sponsorship program. It is important to remain flexible and open to unique ideas in refining and improving these efforts. The single biggest asset in establishing and implementing a successful sponsorship or partnership approach across the board is the support of an organization's leaders. Senior leaders must become intentional about sponsoring and partnering with women to ensure long-lasting and sustainable progress. It will take time, effort, and serious commitment, but it will be among the most rewarding actions you take.