

Council helps women lawyers get a leg up on partnership ladder

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The legal profession, especially as it is practiced in large firms, naturally lends itself to mentoring.

Young associates are teamed with more experienced lawyers or even firm partners for projects or cases, giving them an opportunity to learn the ins and outs of their craft.

They may not even need a formal mentoring program because ambitious associates naturally gravitate to partners with the knowledge and interest to pass on what they know.

But as more and more women reach partnership level in firms, they are recognizing the special difficulties facing young women lawyers.

For example, many women lawyers still are responsible for the bulk of child care or caring for aged parents, said Marie Woodbury, a partner at Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP. In addition, women and men communicate differently not only to each other but to clients, which makes development of rainmaking or trial work sometimes difficult, she said.

"I think role-modeling is very important," she said. "I think it's hard for women to use men as role models because they have different issues that they have to deal with."

With that in mind, Woodbury and several other women partners at Shook formed the Women's Management Council a little more than two years ago to give themselves a platform from which to improve their practices as well as reach down and assist women associates climbing the partnership ladder.

The council, which meets by teleconference monthly and in person once a year, develops firmwide programs, brown bag lunches and seminars aimed at issues that affect all lawyers to some degree but women in particular.

For example, the council recently had a seminar for lawyers to write the short biographies that appear on the firm's Web site. Woodbury said women are less likely to promote themselves, often writing little more than where they went to school and



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Some of the partners on Shook Hardy & Bacon's Women's Management Council include (from left) Lori McGroder, Gay Tedder, Marie Woodbury, Madeleine McDonough, Mischa Buford and Susan Berson.

where they got their law degree.

"We don't have a direct mentoring program set up," she said. "What we've tried to do is use other avenues to communicate information to the younger lawyers, using ways other than just the mentor-mentee relationship."

Woodbury noted that during the council's lifetime, the number of women partners in the firm has doubled and now make up 20 percent of all partners. Although it's difficult to draw a direct link, she said the council giving women lawyers a feeling of community must have helped.

"One of our goals in the beginning was to create an environment that was a comfortable place for women to succeed and stay in," she said.

Among those who say they have benefited is Jolie Justus, a former associate who is

now of counsel and oversees the firm's pro bono efforts. Justus helped found a committee focused on balancing work and family responsibilities based on what she heard from council members.

"That is one concrete way the Women's Management Council has been able to, over a large scale, mentor us," Justus said. "It was pretty amazing to hear some of the first women in the firm who were able to give birth while remaining on the partner track."

Madeleine McDonough, another partner at the firm and member of the council, said she takes what she hears at the council and uses it in her daily interactions with younger lawyers, trying to pass along practice tips and other skills.

"Sometimes they need training or supportive encouragement and sometimes a shoulder to cry on," McDonough said.

"There's a lot of informal mentoring, and that's the bulk of what we do."

But change is on the way. A firm task force is developing a new formal mentoring program, which it hopes to have in place by mid-spring, said co-chairman Bruce Tepikian, a partner at the firm.

Tepikian said that informal mentoring, similar to what's come from the women's council, is very successful throughout the firm.

The new program, he said, probably would be more of a place for young lawyers to iron out personality differences and learn how to negotiate the firm's corporate structure, which generally isn't taught in law school.

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