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Work heading coalition highlights key ways to be successful at a law firm

This year, I have the honor of serving as president of the Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law, a legal association made up of attorneys from more than 50-member firms and 20 corporations.

The coalition's purpose is to promote the success of women in the legal profession. Leading this large group — with its various constituencies, including in-house attorneys, law firm partners and associates — has been extremely rewarding and also instructive.

Serving as president of this group requires many of the same qualities needed to maintain positive and mutually beneficial client relationships as a partner in a law firm.

Although I have practiced law for nearly 20 years now, my term as coalition president has given me the unique opportunity to be close to hundreds of attorneys, at law firms and in-house, and has enabled me to have an even better picture of what is happening in the legal profession at all levels.

As an employment attorney and litigator, this insight has made me a better attorney and given me better understanding of what my clients need in order to succeed.

The following are some important qualities needed to lead both the coalition and a legal team:

1. Have clear objectives and goals and have your team work toward them together.

The coalition's stated goal is to provide programming and networking opportunities to support and build upon the success of female attorneys. This clear goal motivates all the volunteers in this group — every coalition delegate wants to meet her career goals or push her career to the next level.

Coalition delegates elevate their own careers through coalition

programs and initiatives while helping others to succeed as well.

As an employment lawyer and litigator, it is equally important for me to understand and work toward the goals of my clients in connection with every matter that I undertake for them.

Whether I am counseling clients on issues relating to the prevention of litigation or representing clients after litigation has already commenced, understanding and working with clients to meet their objectives is essential.

It may be more complex than simply "winning" a case or settling in a certain manner; each client and each dispute may present different issues that I need to understand at the outset so that the client and I can work together to ensure a successful result.

2. Surround yourself with talented individuals.

The coalition has a large board and several committees chaired by fantastic individuals who are

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passionate about the tasks they are undertaking for the coalition.

As a result, in just a couple of months, we have hosted many well-attended events — including Continuing Legal Education sessions on legal topics, mentoring and networking events. Organizing these events for hundreds of attorneys is not something I would have had the time to achieve on my own.

Additionally, the women who chaired these programs used their differing perspectives to make the events successful. The same goes for my law practice; in order to achieve excellent results, I know I can look to the other attorneys with whom I practice at my law firm.



Margo Wolf O'Donnell is a shareholder in the litigation and employment practice groups at Vedder, Price P.C. She successfully represents clients at all stages of litigation and regularly acts as a business adviser on the prevention of litigation. She is a past recipient of Law Bulletin's "40 Lawyers Under 40" publication, and Leading Lawyer Network recognized her as one of the 100 Leading Women Lawyers in Illinois.

3. Use feedback and/or criticism to your advantage.

At the coalition's largest event last year, we heard that many attorneys were disappointed with the lack of ethnic diversity present at this event and other coalition events.

We immediately took action and reached out to other female groups in Chicago including the

Black Women's Lawyers Association, the Asian American Bar Association and the Chicago Committee to join together for a large event on diversity in the profession.

Working with these groups has enabled our group to gain exposure, and we hope this will diversify our membership and attendance at future events. Throughout my legal career, I also endeavor to act upon and learn from feedback received from clients, judges and other attorneys with whom I work.

4. Always be ready to "sell" the group by updating prospective members on the benefits of joining. I constantly find myself in

situations in which I can discuss the benefits of joining the coalition with prospective law firms or in-house attorneys.

I send updates on the coalition — including programming that might be of interest to these firms and attorneys — as often as I can. I also make sure that my clients and prospective clients are aware of information that might benefit them and their companies. The same methods apply — I send them articles or legal updates, or PowerPoint presentations, or I offer to present seminars in-house on new or changing areas of the law.

5. Do not be afraid to break out of the mold. In the past few years, the coalition has grown exponentially, as has its programming.

The group was previously limited to law firm attorneys only. We then realized that the objectives of the coalition — the promotion of female attorneys — could apply equally to in-house attorneys.

We therefore expanded the group to include these in-house attorneys and have had a very positive response with attorneys from more than 20 companies joining the group almost immediately.

At the same time, perhaps because of the inclusion of in-house attorneys and the increased opportunities to meet and network with these individuals, the number of law firm members in the coalition has almost doubled.

A law practice, like the coalition, must constantly evolve to keep up with current legal and business trends in order to expand and thrive.

Serving as a leader in a legal organization such as the coalition, and working with the hundreds of attorneys in that group, has been an exciting and interesting experience that has complemented my legal career and highlighted for me many of the important aspects of successful advocacy and client representation.