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Jockeying for Feedback

by

Carol Frohlinger

If you're a female associate who aspires to be partner, you have to get over "The Tiara Syndrome." Symptoms include keeping your head down, delivering excellent work, expecting that people will notice--and eventually place a tiara on your head.

It's naive to think that knowing your stuff cold and billing the requisite hours are enough to make the cut these days. Don't think that no news is good news. What you don't know can hurt you. Research shows that the playing field is not yet equal for women, and women are evaluated differently than men. The fact is women have to negotiate for things for themselves that their male colleagues take for granted.

First on the list is negotiating for feedback. Getting useful feedback is critical because you can't fix what you don't know is broken.

You can't rely on the formal performance evaluation process in law firms. Most are done only annually. The focus tends to be on tangible objectives, omitting subjective "perceptions" that can make or break your partnership chances. And you probably won't get the specificity you need to correct whatever behavior may be hurting you.

So you have to solicit informal and timely feedback. That can be a challenge; it's awkward to ask, people are busy, and few know how to give useful feedback anyway. Here are some strategies for overcoming those obstacles:

1. Ask the right people. Approach a partner with whom you have worked recently--someone who seems open to the conversation. But don't stop at one partner; create a list of three or four others. Then work your way through the list, using the tips that follow.
2. Pick the method to conduct the negotiation (hint: don't default to e-mail--it's likely be ignored). Then pick a time and place that will be conducive, someplace quiet at a time the partner isn't rushing to make a filing deadline.

But e-mail can come in handy to arrange the meeting. For example: "I enjoyed working with you on the XYZ matter last week. I would appreciate it if you are willing to provide me with some feedback. I know you are busy and I promise to take no more than 15 minutes of your time. Would coffee on Thursday at 8 A.M. work for you? I look forward to hearing from you."

3. Plan out how you will open the negotiation. Think about the words you will use to make it clear that you are soliciting feedback on both the quality of your work and your working style.
4. Clarify any ambiguous comments, and elicit specific examples--particularly about your working style. You might say: "You mentioned that I seem too hesitant about new assignments--can you tell me more about what I said or did that gave you that impression?" Tone is essential. Ask nicely, no sarcasm or skepticism.
5. Don't push back. Listen attentively, no matter how difficult that may be. Don't make excuses or offer self-justifying explanations.
6. Say "thank you." Whether or not you agree with the comments, accept them in good faith. Appreciate the fact that she went out on a limb for you.

After the meeting, reflect on what you heard. If it was good news, take a moment to enjoy it. Then consider the criticisms. Separate feedback about your work from that about your working style. Figure out what needs to be fixed.

Feedback not only gives you a chance to improve as a lawyer, but the way you initiate the process and handle criticism can make a strong impression on those above you on the career ladder. Now get moving.

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