

Is your firm's women's initiative all that it can be?

Carol Frohlinger asks the questions that will help you evaluate how effective your firm's gender diversity programmes are.

By now, 97 per cent of law firms¹ have either established or plan to establish women's initiatives. But are these initiatives delivering on their promise?

Relatively new to the legal profession, women's initiatives in the corporate arena have been delivering value to organisations that sponsor and support them for some time². Law firms should be enjoying the same results. Yet, some within the legal sector view such programmes with a great deal of scepticism³, questioning their effectiveness as well as the engagement level of their members.

So, how can you evaluate the effectiveness of your firm's women's initiative? Consider whether the initiative achieves the following objectives:

1. Connects its objectives to the firm's needs

Women's initiatives inevitably face questions. Men may be suspicious, asking why a women's initiative is needed and/or, what women involved in the programme are talking about behind closed doors. Women may wonder whether it is wise to be associated with a women's initiative, asking whether people will think those involved in the initiative just sit around and complain. Women's initiatives that work are communicated often. Their leaders get buy-in from others in the firm by demonstrating how the initiative is achieving tangible business results.

To get open support from firm leadership, as well as the funding required, it is important to connect the dots for others so that they can easily see how they too benefit from the initiative.

2. Places emphasis on building skills and capabilities.

Time-pressed lawyers with daunting billable hours goals have to make a choice⁴ between billing an hour or attending a women's initiative meeting. The decision point is whether or not they are convinced that their investment will be worthwhile. Effective women's initiatives meet that hurdle by offering solid content that enables women to enhance their skills.

Bringing in outside speakers to share their expertise is an ideal solution, but there are cost-effective alternatives. For example, we recently launched the 'Just Add Women Meeting Toolkit' series⁵ so that internal leaders could facilitate skill-building sessions on a variety of career critical topics. Those meetings are supported by a

detailed facilitator's guide, slides and participant meeting materials so that their time-investment is well used. As more firms move to a 'competency' model to assess talent from the traditional lockstep approach, specialised content that takes into account the unique challenges women face in firms will become even more important.

3. Builds a cohort that works together to change the status quo

Initiatives can uncover systemic organisational characteristics that disadvantage women as a constituency. The issues that bubble-up through initiatives are important – firms that listen carefully and take them seriously can fix problems they didn't even know they had. More importantly, however, initiatives can provide cover so that no one woman alone has to stick her neck out to address potentially sensitive issues.

So, how does your firm's women's initiative stack up? If your firm has room for improvement, don't be discouraged – there is a learning curve. When women's initiatives work well, the benefits inure not only to individual women but to their firms and to the profession more broadly. [WOMENLEGAL](#)

Carol Frohlinger, a qualified lawyer, is co-founder of the leadership and negotiation training company Negotiating Women, Inc. and co-author of *Her Place at the Table: A Woman's Guide to Negotiating Five Key Challenges to Leadership Success* (JosseyBass/John Wiley, 2004). She can be contacted at carol@negotiatingwomen.com.

References

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2. Singh, V., Vinnicombe, S. and Kumra, S., 'Women In Formal Corporate Networks: An Organisational Citizenship Perspective', *Women in Management Review*, Vol. 21, No. 6. (2006);
3. Howell, Denise, 'Death by Committee', *The American Lawyer*, (June 2008);
4. Some firms (not many) do allow billable hour credit for attending women's initiatives meetings;
5. See www.negotiatingwomen.com/products/just-add-women-meeting-agendas/ for more information.