

The generation gap

Two views of being an attorney hurts the old and the young

As a millennial, I often hear the same complaint from my fellow young female lawyers: “Why is it so hard to find a female mentor?” Digging deeper, there are often two complaints. The first: There aren’t any female partners at my firm. The second: OK, yes, there are some female partners at my firm, but they often made career and family choices that I don’t want to make.

Let’s look at both of these. Last year, consulting group Bain & Co. released the results of a five-year study on men and women in corporate America. The study asked about both genders’ interest in pursuing a top management position in a large company.

The results may surprise you. In the first two years of their career, 43 percent of women aspired to be in top management. Conversely, only 34 percent of men aspired to do the same. Equally important, both genders were equally confident about their abilities to reach those top positions.

Two years later, the numbers changed, fairly dramatically. Thirty-four percent of men with two or more years of experience still wanted to be in top-level management. The percentage of women, however, plummeted. Only 16 percent of women with two or more years of experience still aspired to be in top-level management. Moreover, women’s confidence about reaching those management positions fell by 50 percent. Men’s confidence levels stayed the same.

Bain found that the declines in aspiration and confidence were independent of marriage and becoming a mother. Rather, women felt that they failed to meet the stereotype of the ideal worker — long hours, constant smartphone use, sacrificing free time. They also felt that their supervisors were unwilling to support them and their career paths. Finally, they felt there were few role models at the top — no women in senior management meant no model to aspire toward.

The law firm landscape shares many similarities with corporate America. According to the American Bar Association’s Commission on Women, women make up 47.3 percent of law school graduates. They make up 44.8 percent of law firm associates. However, they only make up 20.2 percent of partners and 17 percent of equity partners. And only 4 percent of the 200 largest law firms are managed by women. So a female millennial attorney may have the same thoughts as a young female member of corporate America — where are the female leaders and how can I become one if I don’t see any?

But just wait, the 20.2 percent of women partners may exclaim. We are here! And we do try to mentor these young women, but many of them are simply not interested in making the same career and life choices that we made.

There is some truth to that. As with most things generational, this is often framed as a workplace conflict between baby boomers, born



Professionalism on Point

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between 1946 and 1964, and those old enough to be their children, millennials, born between 1980 and 2000. And as a generational trend, millennials are opting out from the classic career ladder their parents may have climbed. In a recent survey, 94 percent of college-educated millennials agreed that their generation does not support the current model of economic and career success, while 77 percent agreed that their personal lives would take priority over their professional goals. In other words, they are taking life as a priority over work/life balance.

The problem when it comes to mentoring relationships is that this may not be a paradigm with which many boomer women agree. Many boomer women fought hard for inclusion of family considerations in the workplace, but they understood that the reality of the workplace meant that success often meant less family and personal time.

However, one of the oft-cited reasons that millennials reject the corporate ladder is that they are the children of these very boomer parents. Millennials are well-aware of the time, dedication and sacrifice it takes to move up the ladder; as a generation, many have chosen to not take that path.

What happens then? Older female mentors may then find themselves frustrated by younger mentees looking to prioritize (not balance) personal lives and/or family lives. Conversely, younger mentees may find themselves frustrated by older mentors who offer personal life options that younger mentees may not find palatable or even possible. Conflict becomes inevitable.

But the reality is that, as the largest generation in the workforce, millennials will take over leadership positions in the next few decades. Unfortunately, the Bain report concluded that “[d]espite women comprising more than half of all college graduates and about 40 percent of MBAs, they number only a slim 5 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs and 17 percent of board members — numbers that have barely moved in decades.”

We need to keep young women in the workplace and help them realize that there is room for women at the top. The modern American workplace has changed significantly over the past century, thanks in large part to boomer women entering, staying in and leading the workplace.

What more change can millennial women bring if they stay in the workplace to lead? I know I want to find out. So let’s encourage mentoring relationships that highlight multiple career paths, personal guidance, shared experiences and mutual respect. Above all, let’s recognize that older women lawyers have a hard-earned legacy they want to leave behind just as younger female lawyers have a legacy they’re only beginning to understand and create. ■

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