

Female Firm Leaders Says Time Is Ripe For Women To Rise

By **Andrew Strickler**

Law360, New York (July 10, 2013, 8:45 PM ET) -- Despite filling less than 5 percent of BigLaw's firmwide leadership roles, changes in the legal industry make the time right for would-be female managers to strive for the boss' chair, a group of women legal leaders said at an American Bar Association seminar Wednesday.

In a wide-ranging discussion touching on gender bias, networking tactics and risk-taking, seven female firm managers traded personal stories and described their professional paths to management. The group urged other women lawyers to recognize their own unique skills and values, as well as the biases held by both sexes that discourage many women from promoting themselves as leaders.

Despite stagnant numbers recently on women in industry leadership, many on the panel voiced optimism that evolving economic dynamics and changing perceptions about what makes a good law firm leader represented an opportunity for women lawyers.

"I think we're right on the cusp of women flooding into leadership in large numbers," said Mary Cranston, chair of the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession and a former chair of Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP.

Among the speakers in the "Women in Charge: Rising to the Top of the Legal Profession" webinar were Anastasia Kelly, DLA Piper's co-managing partner, Americas; Kim Koopersmith, chairperson of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP; Susan Levy, managing partner at Jenner & Block LLP; and Kellye Moore, managing partner at Georgia firm Walker Hulbert Gray & Moore LLP.

Koopersmith was among several who discussed the need for aspiring women leaders to set clear priorities and take professional risks. She described her own attempt to change her firm's stance on less-than-full-time work, and her successful case that she'd prevailed in serving clients and the firm while working a four-day week and raising a family.

"That could have been an obstacle but it became a way I made my mark," Koopersmith said.

Despite the optimistic tone of the panel, the recent data on women in firm leadership roles aren't promising. A recent national survey from the National Association of Women Lawyers found that women still typically hold only 20 percent of positions on firms' highest committees, while only 4 percent of the biggest 200 U.S. firms have a woman as a firmwide managing partner.

That survey released in October also found median compensation still lags between women and men at all levels, but particularly among equity partners, with women earning about 89 percent of what their male colleagues take home.

The number of large law firms with women heading offices, practice groups and governance committees dropped from 50 to 42 between 2012 and 2013, the Women in Law Empowerment Forum said in January.

Another member of the panel, Madeline Cahill-Boley, executive committee chair for San Diego-based Sullivan Hill Lewin Rez & Engel, argued that changing economics in the industry meant different priorities for firm-client relationships, and a new emphasis on efficiency and collaboration, skills she said that women should better emphasize.

"Team building is going to be the hallmark of the new structure in the law firm, rather than the top-down directives we've seen in the past," she said.

Others on the panel also said that while skills often associated with women — consensus building, for example — are increasingly valued, the ability to build a big book of business remains a key career driver.

Recognizing the importance of her practice and the value of her own knowledge of clients' businesses "made the aspiration to become a managing partner all the more imaginable," said Lisa Borsook, executive partner at Toronto-based WeirFoulds LLP.

--Editing by Andrew Park.

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