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A More Strategic Women's Initiative

What is your firm's strategy to retain and advance women? Can you articulate the firm's specific goals and action steps? Can you describe and measure results? Can you explain how this strategy reflects and supports the firm's other strategic business priorities?

Women's initiatives have existed for many years and are now almost universal in law firms, but most of them have been ineffective in producing meaningful change. They have been beneficial in some ways, particularly in promoting family-friendly policies and providing business development training and networking opportunities for women. But in terms of the most meaningful results – increasing the presence of women in partnership, leadership and rainmaking ranks – few women's initiatives have produced any significant results.

This is in large part because women's initiatives have not acted as catalysts for change. They have focused on "fixing the women" rather than challenging the biases, systems, and patterns that prevent women – even those who have proven themselves as rainmakers and leaders - from moving up. They also have failed to focus on strategic business objectives and building alliances with powerful men in the firm and in business. As a result, in most law firms, women's initiatives are not regarded with the gravity or urgency necessary to produce real change.

In fact, by focusing on programs and events, women's initiatives divert women's attention from attacking the institutional biases that block their careers. Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer of Stanford Business School has described a situation at the University of Illinois, where the protests by women about unequal pay subsided after the university established a committee to study the facts and make recommendations. Women's attention became focused on the committee rather than the status of women on campus. Pfeffer concludes that the university's strategy effectively "co-opted the opposition, making the potential protesters part of the university, feeling less estranged and like outsiders." (Jeffrey Pfeffer, *Power: Why Some People Have It - and Others Don't*, HarperCollins, 2010) By supporting event-focused women's initiatives rather than facing up to the cultural changes that are needed, law firms have essentially done the same.

That situation may be about to change, at least at one firm. Edwards Angel Palmer & Dodge has started a unique Women's Business Collaborative (WBC) to demonstrate the business and revenues attributable to women's efforts. The firm has had a women's initiative since 1996. In 2009, the firm reorganized the women's initiative to focus on business generation by women partners and associates

through collaborative efforts. Its name puts the emphasis where it belongs, on business, and it does so in a distinctly female-oriented way: by stressing collaboration among all firm lawyers, women and men. It focuses on business generation because that is the key to power in law firms and gives the initiative greater legitimacy and impact. And it emphasizes collaboration to engage the men in the firm to work with the women in a collective, client-driven effort.

The WBC is an entirely new kind of women's initiative. It is a separate department in the firm and every women lawyer is a member. It has mechanisms in place to track the efforts and results that show the success of the firm's women lawyers. All women's time and business development activities, including how they use their marketing budgets and amounts they spend on women-oriented events, can be tracked by gender, and results can be measured and attributed.

Having systems for this purpose is critical not just because they track women's business generation activities and outcomes, but also because they can show the financial benefits of a team-oriented approach. For example, women clients and women-owned businesses are a large and growing part of the business world. The tracking systems the WBC has in place can demonstrate that marketing and client initiatives targeted toward women result in new clients for the firm, and that putting together the right team to serve these clients' needs results in greater client satisfaction and retention.

The WBC systems are also being used to ensure that women are treated fairly when the firm staffs new matters and allocates origination credit for them. Women record the time they spend on business development, so their time records show their involvement in pitches and other business development activities. Partners who open a new client matter must indicate on the new business form whether a woman attorney will be working on the matter. By comparing the new business form to the woman's time and activity records, the WBC can remedy a situation where a woman who helped bring in business is not included on the client team or does not receive adequate origination credit.

The Women's Business Collaborative has a clear mission and a strategic purpose. Its innovative approach energizes women, empowers them, and makes them less vulnerable to the demoralizing effects of gender bias. This new kind of women's initiative promises to be a real game-changer.