

## **What Men Need to Know About Women's Initiatives...That It's the Right Thing to Do**

### ***Women Connect***

By Thomas Delaney

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Earlier this summer, the ARK Group/Managing Partner hosted its fourth annual conference "At the Forefront of Diversity – Women Legal 2011." This seminar emphasized the importance of advancing the dialogue between law firms and their clients on the topic of gender diversity. Attorneys, general counsel and executives from all over the country, including two representatives from Sedgwick, gathered in New York City for this conference.

Sedgwick Orange County partner Thomas Delaney, Deloitte Financial Advisory Services LLP partner Gregory Swinehart and Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey general counsel Linda Willett participated in the panel discussion "What Men Need to Know about Women's Initiatives – and Why? How to Engage Men as Partners in Developing Women Talent," moderated by Sedgwick Chief Marketing Officer Kathleen Flynn. Throughout the discussion, panelists discussed the business case for creating and building a women's initiative in a professional services firm. Discussion topics included: retention and succession for women, leadership cultivation, the impact of gender-diversity initiatives on corporate law departments, leveraging the value of women affinity groups, initiating the conversation about gender diversity with your clients, the future of women in leadership and the ways in which men can support and be involved in women's initiatives.

### ***Building upon the Future ...It's the Right Thing to Do***

Although we are far from the days of the signing of the 19th Amendment, women continue to strive for equal opportunities in the legal profession. A women's initiative provides a forum for women to openly discuss issues and the challenges they collectively and individually face. The approaches traditionally used to succeed in business development and leadership, do not always resonate with women and their preferred methods for cultivating client relationships. By providing women attorneys the training and opportunities to build solid client relationships, firms and corporations are securing their futures, and building strong foundations for leadership.

### ***The War for Talent...It's the Right Thing to Do***

A study conducted by the American Bar Association revealed that since 2000, nearly 50 percent of all law school graduates were women. The results of a 2010 study conducted by the National Association for Law Firm Placement (NALP) indicated that 19 percent of partners in law firms are women. The disconnect between women law school graduates and

women achieving partnership in law firms is dramatic. All businesses and accounting firms are no different from law firms; each struggle to hire and retain the best and the brightest in the talent pool. To continue to remain competitive and provide the highest quality work with the most talented professionals, organizations must continuously seek ways to attract, train and retain this large portion of the workforce. According to Swinehart, "Deloitte understands that to remain competitive and to continue to provide the highest caliber work to our clients, we must continually address the needs of all diverse candidates, women included, and find ways to bring them to our firm and develop them professionally and as leaders. It is important that we prevail in attracting the best."

Leadership development and opportunities are seen as a critical element of a successful women's initiative. For example, in 2004 Sedgwick established the Sedgwick Women's Forum to alter the way gender issues are addressed at the firm. Since its inception, the Women's Forum has provided numerous training sessions, leadership opportunities and networking events for its women attorneys. The effect of the Women's Forum is felt in the growing number of Sedgwick women partners, women leaders and attorneys who cite the Women's Forum as their reason for choosing to work at Sedgwick. In 2010, Sedgwick's partnership was 24 percent female, which exceeded NALP's peer group average of 19 percent. Also, in 2011, Sedgwick's first woman office managing partner was elected to lead one of its offices in a major U.S. city. The firm culture has been shaped dramatically since the Women's Forum's seven years of operation. Although difficult to prove, the growth of Sedgwick's women partnership is a direct result of the efforts of the Women's Forum.

### **Everyone Benefits...It's the Right Thing to Do**

According to a 2010 study conducted by Minority Corporate Counsel Association, 94 of the Fortune 500 companies' legal departments are run by women. This growing statistic provides a significant element of the business case for supporting women's initiatives in firms. In corporate America, as in law firms, the women of today, will be the leaders of tomorrow.

The struggle is how law firms can provide a program that meets the professional development of their own women attorneys while also building outreach to clients with valuable programming. By providing clients with the opportunity to engage in educational programs and events that cater to their professional needs and leisure time preferences, these initiatives can differentiate firms from competitors, while building strong relationships with existing and potential clients. Many firms have found creative ways to engage men women in these networking events. The men can leverage the events by offering invitations to their women clients, and hosting pre and post event meals or cocktails. Some firms have found ways to sponsor or present programs that are of interest to all genders.

Further, women bring a different perspective to the workplace. As the world becomes more diverse, so does the consumer marketplace. As a result, there is a business need for law firms to follow suit by being inclusive based on gender, race and sexual orientation. For instance, panelist Willett discussed the importance of diversity when hiring a law firm because of the broad diversity represented by the clients of Blue Cross Blue Shield. She also stressed the importance of communication. Specifically, her outside counsel is aware of her own personal business needs and challenges, and the value of outside counsel understanding her client base in a more in-depth level.

### **Conclusion: Only One...*It's the Right Thing to Do***

A women's initiative is the right thing to do. Not only can it help facilitate fair, moral and ethical tools for providing everyone with the same business and leadership opportunities, but it can increase business and be a competitive advantage in the war for talent. Most importantly, it is imperative for men to embrace and be engaged with their organization's women's initiative as it can also benefit them.