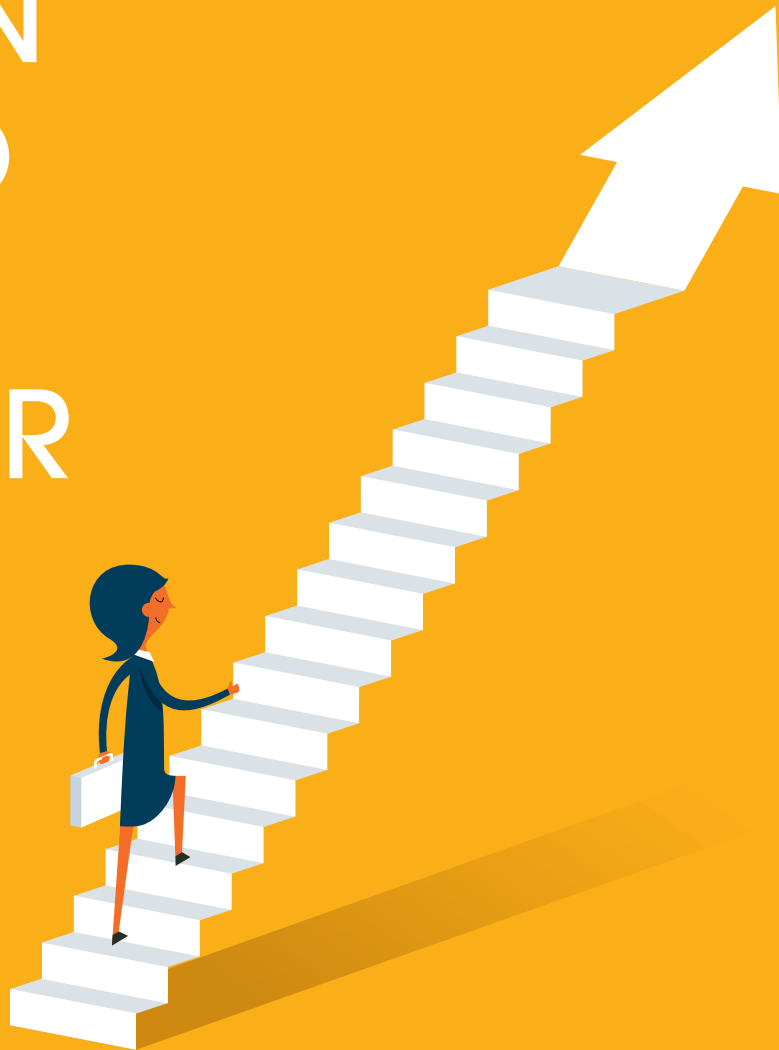


# DATA-DRIVEN ANSWERS TO ACCELERATE SUCCESS FOR WOMEN

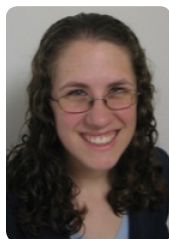
**How to identify and make the most of key differences in character, mindset and behavior that help women associates succeed in making partner.**

**By Lori Berman, Heather Bock and Juliet Aiken**



**YOU'RE SMART. AND YOU WORKED HARD** in law school, preparing thoroughly both for class and exams. As a result, you earned grades as good as – if not better than – anyone else in your class. You know the law well and if someone read one of your briefs they wouldn't know if it was written by a man or woman. After all, you were trained the same way as all of the men in your law

school class; and you've succeeded by doing the right things – the same kinds of “right things” men do to get ahead. But to get ahead as a woman in a large law firm – to get promoted to partner – can you continue to do exactly as your male counterparts do, or do you need to take a different strategy to excel? On average, fewer than 20 percent of partners in large firms are women, so



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WLJ : Women Lawyers Journal® : 2016 Vol. 101 No. 4

## A preference for working in teams was statistically significantly related to success for female but not male lawyers

there must be something that 20 percent are doing differently, right?

Right. We conducted a large-scale empirical research study on the characteristics, mindset and behaviors that predict who in large, top-tier law firms will be promoted to partner, feel like they are flourishing in their career and stay healthy in the process. We surveyed and interviewed more than 300 lawyers. Our results, recently shared in full in *Accelerating Lawyer Success: How to Make Partner, Stay Healthy, and Flourish in a Law Firm*, published by the American Bar Association, show that while there are some consistent findings between men and women who make partner, male and female partners are not necessarily cut from identical cloth. Overall, we found a good amount of overlap between what men and women need to do to make partner. But the key differences that helped women succeed highlight where aspiring female associates might best focus their energy and, more importantly, adjust their mindset if they want to make partner. This article focuses on those differences.

Associates looking to get promoted to partner typically understand the importance of having strong working relationships. But what does that look like? For one, we found that lawyers who made partner in ten years or fewer were more likely to invest in relationships that are good for their career compared to lawyers who had been at a firm for 11 years or more without making partner. However, we found that the nature of these relationships was different for women and men. While both men and women who make partner strategically invest in relationships that are good for their career, women who make partner go the extra mile and form meaningful, authentic friendships at work. In other words, women who make partner prioritize interpersonal relationships in addition to working relationships. We also found that the importance of both planning and setting boundaries was different for men versus women.

### EMBRACING AND ENJOYING TEAMWORK

Lawyers are always working in teams to solve complex problems for their clients. While you may expect being a team player would be helpful if you are working in a big law firm, a preference for working in teams was

statistically significantly related to success for female but not male lawyers. In particular, 65 percent of women partners in our study said that they liked teamwork, compared to about 50 percent of female nonpartners and male lawyers (whether they made partner or not). In other words, a preference for teamwork affects female lawyers' chances of ascending the career ladder compared to men.

### STYLES OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

The types of relationships that female partners tend to build look different from their male counterparts and other women lawyers who did not get promoted to partner. The women who made the effort to connect with colleagues in a deep, authentic way and enjoyed making friends at the office were also the ones who were more likely to make partner. For example, nearly half of the female partners in our study told us they make friends at work, while fewer than 20 percent of female nonpartners and male lawyers (whether they made partner or not) said the same. Perhaps it makes sense that lawyers with a number of friends at work are likely to be selected as partners—they are valued in the office, and existing partners will take note of this when expanding their ranks. But why isn't cultivating friendships at the office, and not just collegial relationships, a similarly strong indicator for male partners?

The answer may lie in the tendency to stereotype women as either caring but incompetent or competent but cold.<sup>1</sup> Research on women in corporate America has found that to be successful in the workplace, women must find a way to be both warm and caring while remaining strong and decisive. In other words, competence and high-quality work are not enough for women to get ahead; they must also be likeable. Women exhibiting warmth without competence may be met with paternalism, while competence without warmth is often greeted with envy. To reconcile these

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## Partners were more likely to say that they actually plan everything in advance and stick to those plans

positions, women must often balance cultivating workplace relationships and embracing responsibilities that establish their competence without appearing cold. In short, some traditionally feminine traits, such as making an effort to connect with colleagues in authentic ways and enjoying teamwork, are often more necessary for women seeking promotion than they are for their male counterparts.

### INFORMAL MENTORS

Female lawyers who are promoted to partner use these relationship-building skills for more than just making work friends. They are strategically used to foster mentoring relationships as well. Women who are promoted to partner are able to cultivate their own mentors, rather than relying on a formally assigned mentor by the firm. In our sample, 67 percent of female partners indicated that they had three or more helpful informal mentors while only 51 percent of male partners stated that they had as many. Perhaps more telling is that only 20 percent of women who had not made partner after over 11 years in a firm had more than three mentors. Why might this be? Often, women hoping to secure promotion need to have both male and female mentors, with each serving different purposes.<sup>2</sup> For example, male mentors may provide access to resources and power, while female mentors are likely to know the obstacles less-experienced women will face or how to manage work-family balance. As such, women need to develop more mentors to achieve the same promotion as their male colleagues.

### SETTING BOUNDARIES

Another key characteristic that we found distinguished female partners was their ability to set clear boundaries throughout their career. Only 12 percent of female partners in our study reported struggling with setting boundaries, compared with 27 percent of female nonpartners, male partners and male nonpartners. This trait may be more important for women in part because they tend to take on more family and home-related tasks than men.

But setting boundaries is also important because making conscious choices on how they spend their

time can impact the path and sustainability of their practice. For example, despite constituting only one-fifth of the partners in large law firms, at least one female partner in the firm is likely expected to take part on each committee, meaning that women may be asked to contribute their time more than men. Setting boundaries in this situation gives female lawyers a way to ensure that they devote a sufficient amount of time to all facets of their practice. Similarly, one female partner told us:

“If you have no boundaries, you will take whatever work walks in the door. But what comes in the door may not help you stretch your skills. The women who make partner figure out how to bob and weave in a polite way to keep options open because there are a limited number of hours and you are going to be tagged for a lot of things. Clients have to take up the biggest piece of the pie, so you have to know how to prioritize client demands. The women who make partner figure that out, or else you are drinking from a fire hose without any deliberation. In addition to women being asked to do more things, they are also more likely to volunteer. I have to literally tell myself

**Some traditionally feminine traits, such as making an effort to connect with colleagues in authentic ways and enjoying teamwork, are often more necessary for women seeking promotion than they are for their male counterparts.**

# Female lawyers may be asked to contribute their time more than men

not to volunteer for something until it is something that actually matters to me.”

As this experience shows, if women hope to become partner, they should learn how and when to say “no,” not just when to say “yes.”

## PLANNING

On top of all this, creating and sticking to a plan also sets women partners apart from the other lawyers in our study. In particular, we found that while the majority of lawyers in our study said they are most

comfortable working with a well-prepared plan, the partners were more likely to say that they actually plan everything in advance and stick to those plans. And, female partners had a slightly easier time sticking to their plans than did their male counterparts. So, while all lawyers need to establish a plan if they hope to achieve promotion, it may be even more critical that women make, and stick to, such plans.



## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Our findings suggest that the path to promotion looks somewhat different for female versus male lawyers. Female partners were more likely to embrace relationships with team members and informal mentors, make plans they could stick to and set boundaries when necessary. There are many behaviors and ways of thinking, however, that both men and women need in order to make partner. For example, we found that both men and women need to take actions and modify their thinking to be “masters of their own fate.” And, equal to being promoted to partner, it is important to feel like you are satisfied and flourishing in your career and to stay physically healthy. For some help with how to do that, you’ll have to read the book. ■



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Biernat, M. & Kobrynowicz, D. (1997). “Gender- and Race-Based Standards of Competence: Lower Minimum Standards but Higher Ability Standards for Devalued Groups.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 544–57; Biernat, M. & Vescio, T. K. (2002). “She swings, she hits, she’s great, she’s benched: Implications of gender-based shifting standards for judgment and behavior.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 66–77.
- 2 Ibarra, H. (1992), “Homophily and differential returns: Sex differences in network structure and access in an advertising firm.” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 37, 422–47.

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