June 19, 2014

Dear Colleagues:

One of the signature projects of the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession in 2014 is the Grit Project. "Grit" entails perseverance, dedication and a strong drive and commitment to achieve one’s goals. A "growth mindset" is the belief that our abilities are flexible and adaptable, and can be improved through conscientious effort. Extensive research concerning the traits and characteristics of those who have achieved professional success has repeatedly confirmed that the possession of grit and a growth mindset are better predictors of success than pure intelligence, what school you attended, or how high you graduated in your class. Significantly, through teaching, these traits can be developed and enhanced. Grit and a growth mindset better enable you to adapt to and overcome ever-changing obstacles and barriers in the workplace and to realize your full potential.

Through the efforts of Milana Hogan, Katie Larkin-Wong, and Carrie Hightman, the Commission on Women has created two training programs that can be used by law firms, law departments, bar associations, and law schools to educate women concerning the importance of grit and a growth mindset, and how to improve these traits. The training materials contain a background bibliography of the latest research; PowerPoint slides; and even a list of program speakers. In addition, to illustrate the real-world application of grit and growth mindset, the training materials contain a series of filmed scenarios to jump-start a program discussion. These vignettes depict important and difficult moments that often arise during the course of a legal career – interviewing for a job, being criticized in an evaluation, and negotiating for origination and billing credit. A detailed facilitator’s guide accompanies these scenarios.

It is crystal clear that providing education regarding grit and growth mindset will be a “win-win” for individual women lawyers and their employers, who have invested considerable resources in hiring and training their young women lawyers. In the past two decades, women have entered the profession at nearly the same rate as men and now comprise over 44% of associates at law firms. Unfortunately, the rate of attrition of women from firms remains disproportionately high. This “leaky pipeline” phenomenon has contributed to a disappointingly small number of women equity partners that has stubbornly refused to climb above the 16% range, as well as a diminished pool of women partners to serve in positions of real power and influence in law firms.

We hope that our Grit Project will serve as a valuable tool to help plug this leaky pipeline. By educating women concerning the importance of grit and a growth mindset and providing training to help develop these traits, we will hopefully stem the tide of attrition and help create a critical mass of women serving as equity partners and leaders of their firms and law departments.

Sincerely yours,

Roberta D. Liebenberg
Chair, Commission on Women in the Profession
American Bar Association