

# Women hold the keys to their success

Strategic thinking helps them balance personal and professional goals.

By Carol Nielsen

SPECIAL TO THE NATIONAL LAW JOURNAL

WHATEVER HER AGE or status in a law firm or corporation, a woman can benefit her career by thinking and acting strategically both inside and outside the office. The keys to success are to create a supportive environment that allows time to focus on what has to be done and how it can be done best: to nurture relationships, build a team to support the endeavor and enjoy.

Anyone can do it. It starts with a plan. Just as every successful business has a plan to keep it on track, so must today's woman. The purpose of the plan is to determine and prioritize what is really important and provide a map to get there. Nobody wants to climb all the way up the ladder just to find out she is on the wrong wall.

The best way to start a plan is to record both professional and personal objectives. Women should think about who and what they want to be in life and match their objectives to a written list of three-year goals. Most people overesti-

*Carol Nielsen is a shareholder in the intellectual property section in the Houston office of Winstead Sechrest & Minick, having a practice emphasis in pharmaceutical, biotechnology, mechanical and chemical arts. She is co-chairwoman of the Dallas-based firm's diversity committee.*

mate what they can accomplish in a year but underestimate what they can accomplish in three years. Next, they should write one-year goals and finally, focus on what to accomplish quarterly. They should keep the list updated and read it often. Written goals are like magnets—they pull one towards them.

Once one has a clear direction, it's easier to develop and focus on the important personal relationships that will provide needed support. First and foremost are those who are closest—one's spouse or significant other, or a very close family member or dear friend. Whether people like to admit it or not, it is a basic mental

## Women attorneys should work on what is achievable.

health necessity to have someone who can be depended upon for emotional support and friendship, at least from time to time. When this relationship is not healthy, it affects one's overall disposition and view of the world, and can affect the interpersonal actions and reactions in the workplace, even if one's desire is to leave problems out of the office and at home.

A common difficulty for many potentially successful women is the constant distraction of being close to someone who is hurtful or disrespectful. These relationships can drain energy and cost time, efficiency, health and happiness.

Women should work on what is achievable. Meanwhile, paramount to these efforts, the difficult associations should be supplemented with healthy relationships.

### Building relationships

Essentially, successful women (like men), need to work on creating the right relationships or network in all facets of their personal lives. Beyond significant others, extended family such as aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, grandparents and, yes, even in-laws, can contribute to one's well-being by helping out and by supporting women and their families. Neighbors, old friends and new friends are also great, as long as these relationships are healthy and not energy siphons.

As John Maxwell writes in his book, *Winning With People*: "People can be the wind beneath our wings or the anchor on our boat." Of course, Maxwell's foremost concern is always on the reader's efforts to have good relationships with others and on the reader's working internally to accomplish this. He wants his readers to consider whether they lift up or bring down their families, friends and associates. But the same principle applies in reverse. So, if no one is already at hand, women should find a healthy relationship to share with a significant other, friend or family member that will give a boost when one needs it from time to time. If such a relationship is already in place, one should nurture it, ensure it remains nurturing, and appreciate it. Remember Maxwell's words: "Good relationships are more than just the icing on the cake in life. They are the cake."

In addition to personal relationships it is important to start planning and focusing on developing selective strategic business relationships. These take time to nurture, and trust is not instantaneous. Networking with business associates and friends—yes, friends—is important whatever type of law one practices, and networking can be done even when one thinks one is too busy. As client-development coach Stewart Hirsch notes: “Just because you can’t do everything doesn’t mean you can’t do anything.” Being busy should not mean the incapacity or inability to create networking opportunities. For example, Hirsch suggests that in the normal course of business, meetings with clients and other professionals give one access to people. The more people one meets, the more opportunity to network.

#### Getting out and meeting people

If a woman does not yet have a network in place, she should develop some more relationships. That means getting out and meeting people, and for some women this does not come naturally. Local or state bar associations are good options if meeting other lawyers is the objective. If new referral sources or potential clients are desired, one should go where they go.

Then, when attending events, one should remember that many people often show up because they are looking for new contacts, too. Hirsch observes: “Whether you are a partner and need to bring in business, a hard-working associate, a solo practitioner or in-house counsel—you can capitalize on the same human skills you use in your personal life.”

Unfortunately, there are only 24 hours in a day. That makes it important to plan, as clearly as possible, how that time gets

used. One should decide what has to be done, what one does best and what tasks and responsibilities one enjoys the most, and then make time for work and time for play and rejuvenation. Then one needs to put together a team or personal network of people who are uniquely gifted at performing the jobs that are decidedly not the best use of one’s time.

The team members must be reliable and must care about one’s home, personal belongings and other personal business—and especially one’s children, if childcare is needed. It does no good to delegate household chores, say, to a cleaning person who breaks the good china or nicks the walls and furniture of the house with the vacuum cleaner, or to a mechanic who did not properly replace an oil seal in one’s car engine when it was in the shop.

But by all means, women should delegate those everyday, mundane tasks to the extent that help is affordable and available. This is especially true if a chore is viewed as dreaded or otherwise stressful. If possible, one should order groceries online and have them delivered, particularly if the grocery store is one’s least favorite place on earth. It’s possible to find a trusted person who needs work and let him or her do all of the odd jobs in life—a personal shopper, for example. On the other hand, if one finds cutting the grass or washing the car relaxing and enjoyable, and there is time to do it, then one should splurge and enjoy the task.

One note to the women with children reading this article: While parenting cannot be delegated, lots of the chores associated with raising children can be. This includes washing clothes, cooking meals and picking the kids up from school. The truth is that, at least in this country, the days of *Leave It to Beaver* are long gone,

and women no longer are expected to have dinner on the table waiting for everyone to come home to at night. Women shouldn’t be afraid to delegate, delegate, delegate to the extent possible, affordable and available. A woman can advance her legal career by surrounding herself with the right people in the right environment, while dispensing with mat-

## Success at home and work takes a healthy support network.

ters that can be handled by others. It is a natural way for her to find more time and improve her happiness and well-being.

The amount and size of a personal-support network is somewhat a function of how much time one needs to direct toward career and business. It is essentially a continuum in which the amount of extra help required for everyday matters and odd jobs, household tasks, errands and similar responsibilities changes to fit the amount of time needed to invest in other business.

#### Organizing time

Besides delegating, organizing one’s own time is key. Organizing includes creating good habits and making good decisions so that one’s most valuable asset—time—is not misused. It is important to learn when to say yes and when to say no—to leave some time free from work so that one can come back refreshed, rejuvenated, creative, thinking big and seeing the big picture—to take care of oneself, including and especially one’s

health. It is a huge time (and money) saver in the long run.

It also is important to exercise. Like it or not, this one cannot be delegated. Exercise is probably one of the best uses of one’s time. It allows one to sleep better, focus better and have more energy. Personal downtime is another hidden time saver. It allows one to reflect and to enjoy the company of significant others and family. Other time savers include getting proper rest and avoiding overdrinking and overeating.

Women should record their progress and continue to improve on the plan initiated. Some people teach that the No. 1 priority in business is always to protect confidence. Women need to focus on the progress made toward the goal—without holding themselves to unrealistic standards of perfection. Realizing a balance between work and free time is not easy, nor is giving up control of the tasks that must get done. However, both of these steps are necessary if women want to continue to build their careers without sacrificing other important things in their lives.

So, success at home and at work takes a healthy support network, intentional planning and organization, and discipline in making things happen. Women in the legal profession should take the time to develop a support network and create and maintain strategic business relationships. If they need help in this area, they can hire a business-development coach.

When surrounded by the right people at home, work and play, women generally can excel at what they do—it is their nature. And the synergistic effects of having good friends together with the right support network will set a woman in a direction that cannot be defeated. Sounds pretty simple. Well, it is. ■