

# TEXAS LAWYER

SEPTEMBER 22, 2014

An ALM Publication

www.texaslawyer.com

## Special Report

### Supporting Women is Good Business

by MELANIE OKON, DAWN ESTES  
and SUSAN HANNAGAN

At the tail-end of a discussion about the treatment of female lawyers by their male counterparts, a young female attorney stood and asked: “What about discrimination that happens at the hands of another woman attorney? Does that still happen?” Sadly, the whispered responses from around the room indicated the answer is still an embarrassed “yes.” Later, we asked women attendees at another conference the same question and received the same answer. Uh-oh. Houston, we have a problem.

Granted, this is an anecdotal and random sampling of women lawyers. And we appreciate that many wonderful examples exist of women in law supporting other women, but there is still much work to do.

To be clear, support doesn't mean women should sit around in circles singing Kumbaya while braiding each other's hair. We can and should disagree passionately with each other in the courtroom and in the boardroom when

necessary. But when it comes to promoting and supporting other women, there is simply no room for women who refuse to help other women (the “Non-Supportives”). While it seems obvious this behavior is destructive

experienced senior female attorneys who oppose initiatives aimed at attracting and retaining female attorneys, like part-time and flextime programs and women's affinity and mentoring groups. These senior-level Non-Supportives often proudly explain they made it to the top without help, and the women following them should, too. In a sense, these senior-level Non-Supportives see it as a rite of passage for other women to endure what they did.

This attitude is based on a false premise. No female attorney has succeeded on her own. Senior-level female lawyers need to remember they stand on the shoulders of those who cut the path before them. Where would women lawyers be without trailblazer Louise Raggio, who led the charge to pass the Marital Property Act of 1967? Before that, female attorneys needed their husbands to sign pleadings for them. So, those ladies

under the age of about 72 owe it to another woman for the simple ability to file a legal document. And Louise Raggio owed a debt to Sarah Hughes, who persuaded Henry Wade to make



for all women, we must recognize that it still exists. Below, we discuss three examples of Non-Supportives.

1. *The senior lawyer and the “I did it myself” attitude.* Many have



her Dallas' first female assistant district attorney. And Sarah Hughes owed a debt to, well, you get the point.

2. *The mid-level attorney and the "assimilation" attitude.* Many senior associates and junior partners, focused on developing clients and building books of business, believe they need to blend in with the guys to succeed. This can be especially true in historically male-dominated fields like trial work. These Non-Supportives may fear male clients will view their legal teams as weak or unimposing if they dare bring a female associate on board. One woman is okay, but two?

As attorneys who practice in these fields, we can assure you that this is, very simply, hogwash. From the coal mine to the technology sector, our male clients have embraced and respected us. Before women presume that male clients will react negatively to women on the "team," they should pause and give men some credit. Most companies and in-house legal departments have a huge appetite for diversity, and some even demand diversity in their legal representation. Failing to champion and promote women in law firms could result in a loss

of substantial business.


3. *The junior lawyer and the zero-sum game attitude.* Unfortunately, some women opt not to support their female colleagues because they see the legal profession as a zero-sum game for women. These Non-Supportives worry there are limited spots for women in firms and feel competition with other women to fill those spots. This attitude is both wrong and short-sighted.

Life is not a zero-sum game. The number of women partners at firms has grown steadily over the past 10 years. More leadership spots open each year for female lawyers in the firms.

Moreover, consider this shift in perspective—what if the woman lawyer working in the next office could be your client in the future? How would you treat her then? (It goes without saying that this applies equally to men and women). For most attorneys in private practice, the ultimate goal is financial independence, and the quickest route to achieve this goal is to build a book of business with loyal clients who trust you. Many of the relationships that will lead to business development later are made working with other young attorneys at the same firm. Some of the young female attorneys around you will move to in-house positions and will be able to send work to outside counsel. If you treat them only as a threat, you miss an opportunity to build a relationship based on trust that might be the ticket to success for you both in the future.

In the end, women supporting other women makes good sense. So, let's stop the destructive Non-Supportive

behavior. Let's stop stepping in front of each other and talking negatively about each other. Let's not merely mentor each other, let's sponsor each other by spending political capital to help each other succeed. Let's include women on deals and trial teams. Let's nominate each other for deserved awards. Let's praise other women for their accomplishments.

We are a firm of 17 lawyers—12 of whom are women. We mentor and support each other daily (including the men). Several clients who send us work regularly are fabulous women we met working side-by-side at large law firms. Another female client is a former lawyer at our firm. And, many of our clients are men in technical industries who champion our support of female attorneys. Take it from us: supporting other women makes good business sense. 



**Melanie Okon and Dawn Estes** are shareholders in and **Susan Hannagan** is an associate with Estes Okon Thorne & Carr, the largest certified woman-owned law firm in Texas.

Since its founding in 2008, the firm has grown to include 17 attorneys across a diverse array of litigation practice areas, including representing Fortune 100 companies and other high-profile clients in Texas and around the country.