



The Importance of Personal Storytelling and Creating Safe Spaces in the Journey Towards Meaningful Allyship

(Session: “Gender and Age Dynamics”)

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Introduction

The terms “allyship,” “mentorship,” and “sponsorship” have become regularly used nomenclature as we talk about supporting young lawyers out of the proverbial law school gate. We have all sat through numerous CLEs where the benefits of implementing these buzz word practices into your career can have significantly positive outcomes for yourself and the lawyer(s) whom you choose to mentor. As women, we leave these CLEs feeling empowered to either be sponsored or be a sponsor. Then, reality hits. Monday morning rolls around, and it is back to the daily grind. We had high hopes to be a sponsor/mentor/ally or to be sponsored/mentored but are unsure how to take the first step.

If you have done any degree of self-help learning, you have undoubtedly heard that often the first recommendation in taking on a big task is to take one small step in that direction. That is what we are here to guide you towards: practical, real life, everyday steps that build a pattern of consistent mentoring, sponsoring, and allyship towards young, female lawyers and female BIPOC lawyers. You do not need to do epic acts in order to be considered an epic mentor. (Though, by all means, be as epic as you see fit!) Rather, you can do small, everyday acts that makes a significant and consistent difference. One critical way to begin this journey is through community building and storytelling. Both the act of sharing AND the act of listening within a community is a profound first step in making headway on allyship.

Building Community: The Basics

In both professional and personal settings, the act of women gathering in small groups to share common experiences has had significant impacts. We gather, drink coffee, and share stories. The sharing of stories around particular experiences has many benefits. First, the space is “safe”—meaning that women can be vulnerable and share difficult details knowing they are often sharing details that have been experienced by many in the group. Second, the group validates the experience. (In many of our shared experiences, the response from some men (and women!) can include gaslighting and downplaying of events, which only discourages vulnerability.) Finally, the group is not trying to “solve” your problem. We listen, we validate, we support. If you ask for help with solutions, we offer help.

While the above description of fellowship around shared experiences sounds basic, we strongly suggest you use these basics in your everyday interactions with young female lawyers. Demonstrating allyship goes back to basics, and only you can create safe spaces to have vulnerable discussions. Unless you actively work at listening, validating, and supporting women through these stories, women will not want to share these stories with you. If we have learned anything through the past year of widely covered media attention on racial inequities, it is that our communities of color do NOT need to do the work involved to create safe and equitable spaces—it’s the white community that needs to. Same concept here: actively create safe spaces

for female lawyers to feel vulnerable to share stories and build allyship. Do not put it on the women to create these spaces on their own.

Creating Space for Storytelling within the Community

So, how do you create the space that welcomes vulnerable discussions? Think “little things”—such as, inviting the new lawyer out to lunch the first week. Give them the “rundown” of the office. Share the insights that you wish you would have known the first week. Explain the team dynamics and office leadership structure to them, and review how they will work with specific staff in their role. This is the “stuff” not outlined in the job description. Recognize and appreciate that a new lawyer who is also female or BIPOC is going to walk into a room of mostly white, experienced lawyers and question if they have what it takes. Imposter syndrome is prevalent in the legal community, but especially so among female and BIPOC lawyers who find themselves in white, male-dominated spaces. Be the type of teammate that shows support from day one and is a friendly face in a scary room. (Also, please have the humility to acknowledge that although you may not understand why this room is intimidating to some, it does not mean that it is not, in fact, an intimidating experience to others.)

Another way to show allyship is to recognize the situation when a colleague is sharing an experience with you that reveals a vulnerability and potentially a trauma. For example, your colleague, Mary, is a first-year lawyer, and identifies as being female and Latina. She shares with you that another employee made a comment about not understanding the Black Lives Matter movement and referenced the importance of Blue Lives Matter and All Lives Matter in a meeting recently. Recognize that at this very moment, Mary is sharing an experience with you that is impacting her, perhaps in a meaningful and sensitive way. **Recognize that this is happening.** Pay attention. Listen intently. Validate the experience and ask how you can support them. Do not promise to fix anything—just listen and ask what they need. Do this, and you slowly become someone Mary feels safe with.

Mentorship within Community

In too many iterations of mentorship CLEs, the pinnacle seems to be a mythic happenstance where a young lawyer manages to find themselves under the wing of a rainmaker, which thus jumpstarts a very successful career. Unfortunately, this typically is not as consistent of an event for female lawyers as it is for our fellow white, cisgendered male lawyers. (This is even worse for BIPOC female lawyers.) This often leaves women without any kind of direction in how to navigate this complex and sometimes infuriatingly insular community.

Instead of only looking up the corporate ladder for a traditional experienced and seasoned mentor, we recommend supplementing this approach with creating a community of peers. This peer group should be lawyers who are a few years ahead of you in their careers. They have often gone through similar experiences and growing pains of learning how to be a lawyer post-law school. And they typically have experienced them very recently, which allows new lawyers to have helpful and concrete solutions and allies in their corner who can use their real, close-in-time

experiences to mentor through the difficult experiences. A well-rounded mentorship network of peers can help lawyers learn, grow, become better advocates, and ultimately better lawyers. If you are a new lawyer, start building your peer group today. (If you are a seasoned lawyer, start encouraging this practice to newer lawyers!)

And Now, You Act (in small, but meaningful ways!)

Though our careers vary in length and type of experience, we have each experienced the good, the bad, and the ugly of being young females in the workplace. Where we see the most impact is when a leader actively takes meaningful, concrete steps to create an environment where we feel heard, valued, and supported.

Here is an example of what we mean: an entry-level minority employee recently told you that she is going to start introducing herself at meetings and adding her pronoun. She would say: “My name is Mary Miller and I use she/her pronouns.” Mary wants to normalize pronoun use in an effort to show solidarity with her transgender friends and colleagues, and others who use pronouns that society would not identify with them based on their feminine or masculine presentation. Senior company leaders are present in this meeting while Mary introduces herself this way. You go next, and introduce yourself using your name and pronouns, in an effort to support the courage that Mary is showing and normalize the new introduction. (Bonus points if you do this AND you are in a position of power at your organization!)

Another small, but mighty example: actively ask Mary’s opinion on topics during meetings. If Mary had the initial solution, give her credit. Cite her in emails, meetings, discussions, etc. Go the extra mile and say, “Mary reminded me that the 6th Circuit actually supported the Defendant’s position of...and I think we should use that in our trial preparation going forward.” It seems basic, but give credit where credit is due. It shows humility and servant leadership, in addition to building your own character as an ally.

All it takes is small, consistent acts through storytelling, listening, and creating safe spaces to turn that into meaningful and long-term change. Start today.