



THE NEW ELLIS GROUP

Monday Monday

Connecting the Dots with Karen Kaplowitz



*Helping you create and reinforce the habits of successful career building,
gleaned from my work as a business development strategist, trainer and coach*

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Don't Let Sex or Sexual Innuendo Get in the Way. American Lawyer Media's *The Careerist* ([click here to read more](#)) column recently reported that one reason women lawyers are not getting ahead is that powerful men in their firms are afraid of sexual innuendo if they show interest in a woman's career. The column said that some men are afraid to have dinner—or even lunch—alone with a woman colleague. The column noted parallel concerns in corporate America, citing reaction to Mark Hurd's fall at Hewlett-Packard. It is ironic that laws to protect against sexual harassment have given rise to defensive behavior by powerful men. If you are a woman who wants to succeed, consider these strategies:

- Make a personal policy of not dating people with whom you work and let people know about it.
- Show interest in potential mentors' families; if they display pictures, ask about their children and spouses. If there are firm family events, meet your colleagues' families. Acknowledging mentors' families signals a lack of interest in any type of sexual relationship and should allay concern on the part of mentors-- and their spouses.
- Find women mentors and seek their advice on dealing with powerful men in the firm.

If you are a man who wants to support talented women without fear of innuendos, consider these ideas:

- Use everyday downtime, like travel to court or meetings, to build relationships with junior lawyers. "Special" occasions like private dinners are inefficient even if they are not suspect. The best mentoring relationships are persistent not occasional.
- Make clear that you consider yourself and them off limits for personal relationships by treating women lawyers very professionally. Avoid frequent comments on their attire or appearance.
- If you are uncomfortable because a woman wears provocative clothing or acts flirtatiously, take action through HR or another colleague. If you are uncomfortable, others probably are too.

Building great firms requires environments which nurture women and protect men from false innuendo since developing the best talent pool cannot occur if women lawyers are excluded.

Example: A junior woman associate was hard-working, smart and showed a lot of promise. She was also single and wore clothes that were very flattering and attracted a lot of attention from men in her office. None of the senior men in the firm were mentors. When a young partner considered to be a "ladies' man" requested that she work with him, several women partners decided to intervene and invited her to meet. When they laid out their concerns, she said that they need not worry because she was about to be engaged. They recommended that she have her fiancé meet her at the office so she could introduce him to colleagues, including the young partner and senior partners. She also heeded their advice and toned down her dress.

If you have observed defensive behavior by men which limits their sponsorship of women lawyers, can you take action to make your firm culture safer for men and more hospitable for women? What actions are you willing to take to eliminate the "sexual innuendo" problem?