



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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Finding Your Professional Groove. Why do some careers take off a lot faster than others? There has been a lot of debate recently about the value of women's initiatives and other diversity programs in law firms and questions about what the critical factor is in career success. Is it having mentors? Is it getting quality assignments? I conclude there is no one critical factor. I had the privilege of looking at a dozen women partners in a leading US law firm to identify the factors that were critical to their success in order to share that information with women associates in the firm to help them accelerate their own careers. Here are the most significant factors I found in the partners' career paths:

- **Taking initiative.** As young associates, several partners attracted attention by boldly taking initiative, in one matter to come up with a winning defense theory and in another matter to identify serious flaws in the reasoning of more senior lawyers from another firm on a transaction.
- **Adaptability.** Half of the women made lateral moves to get to the firm. Several also changed their practices mid-career. Willingness to correct course was crucial.
- **Early success.** Virtually all the partners enjoyed early success as associates which propelled them forward. Follow up immediately on any offer of help.
- **Mentors.** Many of the women partners had significant mentors, some male, some female. And the women who had mentors themselves became mentors to other women.
- **External validation.** The women partners enjoyed a lot of external validation of their success by being named to lots of lists like Best Lawyers in America, Super Lawyers, and Rising Stars.
- **Specialization.** Virtually all the women used specialization as a powerful career strategy.
- **Clarity of vision.** Many of the women forged new paths, such as creating permanent part-time arrangements and starting new practice groups.
- **Passion and commitment.** Across the board, the partners were passionate about their work.

Since career success is often determined early, the most critical question is whether firms are creating cultures and opportunities in which young lawyers can stand up and stand out.

Example: A firm prided itself on staffing matters leanly, often with one partner and one associate. At the beginning of a new transaction, a partner took an associate to meet with the client. The partner emphasized that he had picked this particular associate because of her experience and good judgment, and encouraged the client to communicate directly with the associate while making clear that he would supervise closely. With the partner's encouragement, the associate took charge as much as possible. She helped the partner and the client get comfortable with her "take charge" approach by reviewing everything with the partner and letting the client know that the partner had blessed her actions. The associate also tried to anticipate issues so she could review them in advance with the partner. As a result, the associate got a lot of responsibility and experience dealing with the client and with more senior lawyers on the other side.

In planning for the long term success of lawyers in your firm, are you allowing junior lawyers—of every stripe—the opportunity to grow and to shine?