The mission of the HBA Gender Fairness Committee, created in 2003, is to examine issues related to gender fairness in the legal profession and develop programs that provide a forum for discussion of these issues, including training and support for attorneys. The committee promotes awareness within the profession and encourages law firms and corporate legal departments to set policies that promote gender fairness.

This year, the committee’s focus was on “best practices: past and future.” Among other activities, the committee hosted a Fall Associates Luncheon and a Management Breakfast in the spring, designed to provide managing partners with anonymous feedback from an associate’s perspective regarding how Houston firms have met and continue to progress toward these goals.

Representatives from 20 different firms attended the Fall Associates Luncheon, where they were given four topics of discussion: (1) Secrets to Success: Unwritten Rules to Success in the Workplace; (2) Career Path Options: To Be or Not to Be on the Partnership Track; (3) Balancing Your Work-Life Scale: Mission Impossible?; and (4) Not Your Mother’s Law Firm: Bridging the Generation Gap. The associates were assured anonymity, which encouraged an open and honest discussion of the topics.

The discussion of the first topic, Secrets to Success, centered on mentoring. Associates recognize the importance of mentoring throughout their career, and would like mentoring programs...
to begin in the first year. They stressed that it is very important for firms to encourage both formal and informal mentoring of young associates. It was noted that male associates form informal mentoring relationships more easily than female associates, and work could be done to close this gap.

The second topic, Career Path Options, spurred discussion about whether associates who choose to work part-time are fairly compensated and how to meet personal obligations (both family and non-family) without negatively impacting an associate’s career.

Associates who discussed the third topic, Balancing Your Work-Life Scale, noted that everyone defines work/life balance differently, but achieving a good balance is just as important for men as it is for women. Associates discussed effective ways to set boundaries and communicate them to their firms and clients. They felt women’s organizations and activities were very important, but wanted more guidance on balancing family and work, including role models that have successfully balanced the two.

As for the fourth topic, Not Your Mother’s Law Firm, the associates noted that success is defined more on a generational level than by gender, and that a greater appreciation across generations of the different definitions of success would facilitate associate/partner relationships. The associates also pointed out the differences between generations with regard to appropriate dress and that associates need to understand the dress code protocol (both written and unwritten).

The firms and legal departments that are signatories to the 2009 Gender Initiative Commitment Statement were invited to send a management representative to the Management Breakfast. Representatives from 19 firms attended and participated in a round-table discussion. The management representatives each received a copy of the discussion questions/topics provided to the associates during the Fall Associates Luncheon as well as a detailed summary of the points discussed. The representatives discussed successes and best practices for the promotion and retention of women attorneys in law firms and legal departments, using the points raised by the associates as a springboard.

The management representatives discussed the value of formal mentoring programs, but also the need to bridge their shortcomings through informal mentoring, which can sometimes be more beneficial. Many firms have regular lunches for female associates and partners to encourage these informal relationships. In addition to mentoring, one partner noted that it is important for management to encourage associates to network, and to publicize the resources available for networking. One firm supports networking by its female attorneys with an annual women’s retreat for attorneys and clients, which provides an opportunity for younger female attorneys to develop their networking skills.

The management representatives also discussed career-path options, and the best way to communicate policies regarding flexible or part-time schedules. They noted the importance of eliminating the stigma often associated with an alternative work schedule, and communicating that partnership on an alternative work schedule is possible. The management representatives additionally discussed the effective use of affinity groups for both male and female attorneys to address work/life balance and other issues important to associates and other lawyers. Such groups can include organizations such as Moms-in-Law or book clubs.

At the end of the Management Breakfast, Daniella Landers, the 2012-2013 chair of the Gender Fairness Committee, encouraged the managers in attendance to sign the revised Gender Fairness Initiative Commitment Statement. The committee revised the statement in 2013, and is distributing it to all firms and legal departments in the Houston area, encouraging them to join as signatories. In signing the 2013 Gender Fairness Initiative Commitment Statement, firms and legal departments commit to a material increase in the number of women at the partnership level and/or leadership positions in law firms by year-end 2016 and to (1) promote policies and practices to retain women; (2) create processes to obtain feedback from employees and their assessment of gender issues in the workplace; (3) offer formal and/or informal networking opportunities, client development opportunities, and mentoring programs to women attorneys; (4) identify and promote opportunities for women attorneys at all levels to participate in challenging projects, leadership committees, practice groups, and management training to help enable women to assume significant management roles within their firms; and (5) embrace the concept of part-time attorneys and flexible work schedules.

If your firm or legal department would like to like to review or sign the Gender Fairness Commitment Statement, please contact Tara Shockley at the Houston Bar Association, 713-759-1133 or taras@hba.org.

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