

Getting the Conversation Started

One law firm's quest to encourage both its male and female professionals to go ALL IN on leaning in

By Sue Stoffer and Melissa Foster Bird

AS A LEAN IN PLATFORM PARTNER, Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP and its diversity committee are taking steps to enhance the recruitment and retention of female attorneys and policy advisors to further their success, promote leadership and foster a better understanding of the unique issues facing women. Our strategic, structured focus on these issues will also allow the firm to enhance the diversity of perspectives we bring to clients and to advance a shared interest in improving diversity more broadly within the profession.

Supporting the Nelson Mullins Women On the Go (WOGO) affinity groups helps us achieve these objectives. The WOGO groups host internal and external networking events and use Lean In materials and programs (available at www.leanin.org) to share ideas and experiences. Our bi-monthly publication, *WOGO News*, highlights the leadership achievements of our female professionals and provides information about the group's events to all firm employees and clients. Twitter users can follow WOGO @NMRSWomen.

While these initiatives provide critical support to our female professionals, it is our new "ALLI (All Leaning In) Circles" that are pushing traditional boundaries.

What Are ALLI CIRCLES?

ALLI Circles are small cross-office discussion groups (20-25 participants per group) that hold virtual monthly meetings to



¹Lean In is a global community committed to offering women the encouragement and support to "lean in" to their ambitions. Founded in spring of 2013 by more than 150 organizations and thought leaders across pop culture, business, politics and education, Lean In principles are based on the book "Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead," authored by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg. Lean In promoted partnerships to bring about organizational change in order to achieve greater diversity in leadership roles, according to the organization.

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explore topics such as “Sitting at the Table,” “Leveling the Playing Field” and “Attributing Success and Vouching for Female and Minority Colleagues.” ALLI Circles also discuss the firm’s leave policies, targeted use of marketing dollars and evaluation bias. A cross-section of attorneys and policy advisors from our 14 offices make up the ALLI Circles and include professionals at every career level. Circle moderators select a topic for each call (and provide a short video or article for background). All moderators receive resources on topics such as developing leadership skills, family/career balance, gender bias, pitching business to female decision-makers, closing the confidence gap, fairly attributing success and being over-mentored and under-sponsored.

The purpose of ALLI Circles is to encourage identification of, and honest conversation about, real and perceived obstacles and solutions with respect to hiring, retention, leadership development and promotion of female and minority professionals. ALLI Circles are designed to provide a safe environment for exploration of these issues with a goal of encouraging all to think and act inclusively.

■ **The Rollout.** We introduced ALLI Circles at a recent firm retreat, and several of our more visible male and female leaders took the stage to demonstrate how a circle works. We asked everyone to commit one year to participation in the ALLI Circles. Circle assignments were handled randomly, taking care to ensure that each circle represents multiple offices, and where possible, splitting up team members who work with each other on a day-to-day basis. Executive committee members shared their expectations that office managing partners and team and practice group leaders actively support and participate in the ALLI Circles.

■ **The Circle Debrief Process.** ALLI Circle moderators take part in regularly scheduled debriefing calls in which we share what is and isn’t working. For example, in several circles, moderators had difficulty getting participants to talk in the first meeting. In a large firm scattered over multiple offices, each ALLI Circle contained many participants who did not know each other or who had not worked together. Several of our moderators used ice-breaking techniques for their first meeting to get the group comfortable with each other. Some started a chain email in which each circle member introduced him or herself in a unique way.

Each Circle has a female-male moderator team. To help them develop their facilitator skills, we share ideas and improvement tips during our regular debriefing telephone calls. While some moderators report finding circle conversations awkward at times, others say the conversations are spirited and engaging. Many of our junior female and minority associates

are more hesitant to engage, but they will approach their moderators (or others) outside of their circle calls with thoughts and comments. We encourage these junior professionals to talk to their moderator (or one from another circle) to discuss how best to be engaged more fully in their circles. While some of the ALLI Circles started off slowly, once the circle members got more comfortable with each other (which can take two or three meetings), the conversations grew more robust. Differing points of view get expressed in the circle conversations, and, importantly, we find that the conversations carry over into the hallways outside of the circle calls.

■ **How Will We Measure Success?** In the short term, it will be observational. Are more female and minority professionals asking, or being asked, to step forward into leadership roles? Are real and perceived obstacles being identified and solutions proposed? Are firm professionals making an extra effort to be more inclusive when assigning projects, putting together client relationship teams and engaging clients and prospects socially? In the long term, success will be measured by increases in female and minority hiring, promotion and retention, along with an increase in business development and acceptance of leadership roles by our female and minority professionals.

■ **Are We Seeing Some Success Now?** You bet. Many of our female and other minority professionals report that simply by getting to know others in their circles, they are finding new business and networking opportunities. Developing these relationships enables them to team up with new people and collaborate to bring value to our clients. In addition, this program has led to a significant increase in general conversations throughout the firm about many of the important issues concerning female and minority professionals. These conversations help to increase awareness and prompt our professionals to act more thoughtfully and intentionally regarding these matters.

We value our role as a Lean in Platform Partner and truly appreciate the dialogue it has created in the firm. We hope and expect that this dialogue will further our efforts to enable the women and minority professionals in the firm to have rewarding and successful careers.

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