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EXERCISING LEADERSHIP THROUGH COMMUNITY OUTREACH

“Service is the rent you pay for the space you occupy” was the motto that recently hung on the wall in the building of my faith community. It is service to family, community and profession that allow us to identify and connect to the people to whom we profess compassion and professional commitment. Service to others can also pave the path to our development of leadership skills that enhance our understanding of human nature and behavior in and out of the courtroom.

Service to others is an important vehicle to leadership development. There are many extant opportunities to hear and respond to the voices and needs of our communities. It is one thing to hear and know about problems and then try to impact those problems from afar or even from behind our desks. However, it is quite another solution to work side by side in the trenches in support of those who try to make a difference for good in the lives of others.

In my experience, when we give in service to others, we often can put our education and legal training to work for others in a way that is dynamic. Legal training and education, when placed side by side with grass root experience, can yield bountiful results for the organization that you have decided to assist, and also for you personally and professionally.

Community Groups

As a female trial attorney, depending on the stage of your personal and professional life and the commitments associated with that stage, it may be advisable to have your professional life and your community involvement overlap. As an example, if you are a mother who has

sought ways to remain involved in your children's school life, you may consider joining the school's home and school association. Your training, background and advocacy skills should allow you to assist the school community and parent organization to highlight opportunities, avoid obstacles and provide legal expertise on behalf of the group. Perhaps your strength is rainmaking. You could then use your skills to raise money to beautify the school campus, provide school activities and scholarships, and the like. You and your office can stand through not only your contribution of time, but also the money you can contribute to these efforts. Offer to beautify the school and suggest that your firm be able to post a sign acknowledging that the beautification was a contribution from your offices. You may want to offer a scholarship for books or a school trip in the name of your firm. The possibilities are limited only by your imagination.

The members of the school community and the community at large will identify you as a resource and as a conscious contributor to the well being of the school community. They will also think of you as a leader on the issues you tackle while also acting as a member and leader of the school community in general. And if you do have children, you will likely be surprised how their respect for you will also blossom and grow. Leadership at home will grow when you are valued as a leader outside of the home.

Leadership in the community can certainly be applied to other types of service, such as community or faith based groups, so that your interests and perhaps your passion in life will coincide with the time and effort that will be required of service to the organization. Myriad are the groups that can benefit by your contributions. Myriad are the benefits you will receive.

Public Relations

While providing time and effort, do not forget to utilize the resources of a public relations expert to publicly acknowledge the work that you contribute. This is a resource that I do not think women use enough. I think that we are taught as women to be humble, mindful of being boastful and aware of tooting our own horn. But it is necessary and helpful, in order to develop your practice, to publicly declare the work that we do as community contributors and trial attorneys.

A public relations expert will help to establish your image in the community as an expert and leader on the issues with which you work or want to work. A public relations specialist can also assist you in creating articles for community papers to disseminate throughout your community to develop your image as a community leader. Community relations can be enhanced and also developed by a public relations expert who can expose and advance your leadership skills in your area of proficiency to the community at large through the expert's media relationships.

Finally, consider joining speakers' bureaus to make your skills known, and you will be seen as a leader by the press. The press will then come to rely on you for your opinions on important issues facing the community. All of these public relations activities, including publicity placement along with special events that you may sponsor, will heighten your perception and reality as a leader in the community.

Networking

Networking in the community is also an important tool to use in developing relationships that can lead to leadership opportunities. Attending community, professional and faith organization meetings, volunteering to assist and then providing excellent service is an effective means of networking and leadership development. Sincerity, availability and performance are the hallmarks of an effective leader.

Use the many contacts that you may already have to reach out to the community and

share the skills and proficiencies that you already have. Most groups and organizations are looking for “A Few Good Men and Women.” In my perception, it is always a few key members of an organization that do the most, and an excellent performance can open many doors.

Volunteer at local radio and or television stations, or use your public relations person to find opportunities for you to speak on issues that impact the community. Your voice that lends voice to the needs of the community will also heighten your skills as a leader and allow you to work and be seen as a community leader.

If your time out of office is limited, volunteer to do legal work for a group in which you have an interest. The group will appreciate that it can use their limited resources in other ways than battling legal issues. But again, it is excellence of the work product, your availability and sincerity that will hit the mark. Your good name, hard work and example will also provide incentive to others. I have been told on many occasions how simply speaking to a group inspired someone to become a lawyer or otherwise enhance their skills as a leader. Women as trial lawyers, women as leaders—perfect together!