Women driving business: issues, changes and opportunities

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> ***"Women belong in all places where decisions are being made ... It shouldn't be that women are the exception." – Ruth Bader Ginsburg***

Being a woman in business presents some unique challenges and opportunities.

It was with this in mind that, in 2016, a then second-year BLG Vancouver associate saw the need for a program to help fill the resource gap for women in leadership and business. Four years later Driven By Women, the brainchild of Julie Bogle, has expanded nationally to all BLG's offices, providing opportunities for women in business and law to connect, share ideas and support each other.

BLG has no shortage of women leaders, all of whom have helped build the firm into what it is today. For International Women's Day, we spoke to some of them about their professional experiences – how far things have come, where there's still work to be done and how to encourage the next generation of leaders.

A seat at the table

Laleh Moshiri began her career at BLG as a litigator specializing in health law. Today she is the firm's National Director of Diversity and Inclusion – the first executive in a Canadian law firm to hold such a position.

Having women at the table, she says, "changes the conversation. But there are so many pressures on women who are 'the only' – they feel their performance is under unique and close scrutiny and that their actions reflect on their entire gender." Moshiri adds that "to capture the full potential and really benefit, we need a critical mass of women in leadership."

Chantal Saunders is a partner in the firm's Ottawa office, practicing intellectual property law and litigation. She stresses the importance of having a multitude of voices at the table in every setting – not just the legal field.

“When there are more women at the table and more women in those leadership roles who are successful … then, I think, women can bring each other up as opposed to competing with each other for that one role.”

Prema Thiele has been with BLG for the entirety of her career. Today she is a partner practising securities law in Toronto and a member of BLG’s Partnership Board, the firm’s governing body. She jokes that she’s a “triple minority” – a woman, a visible minority and from Saskatchewan. The firm’s Investment Management Group, she says, is mostly made up of women.

“What I say to anybody – woman, man, visible minority, young lawyer, immigrant – is you can’t walk into a room thinking about and assuming what others are thinking.”

“I tell people … you’ve got to walk into a room with confidence. You’ve got to walk in and assume that every time you have a meeting with someone, you have the opportunity to ‘wow’ them. Don’t try to guess what they’re thinking about you. Think about what you can do and how you’re going to ‘wow’ the room.”

The power of mentors and sponsors

Historically speaking, the legal field has been dominated by men. The gap is closing, though, particularly among younger lawyers. According to the Law Society of Ontario’s 2018 numbers there were 9,818 women lawyers under the age of 40 and 8,382 men. Of lawyers aged 50 and up, more than 16,000 were men – and a little more than 7,000 were women. In total, at the end of 2018, 30,644 men in Ontario were lawyers and 23,088 were women.

“Studies have shown that diversity delivers better business results,” The Honourable Louise Arbour, BLG’s jurist-in-residence, says. “When issues are tackled from different perspectives, the results are more robust and universal. By promoting a gender-balanced workplace, we will … achieve progress and [build] a more dynamic work environment.”

“Despite having more women graduating from law, women still leave the legal profession at an alarming rate. Having mentorship in law is important,” adds Louise Lee, a Calgary partner, co-leader of the Driven by Women initiative in Calgary and a member of BLG’s Private Equity Steering Committee.

“Mentorship is a great [way to] support women, but one of the big pieces is the sponsorship of women as well. [It’s important to] pave the way to ensure that women are tapped for certain positions as they make their way through the pipeline, and ensure that we aren’t losing well-qualified women along the way.

“We need to be more deliberate in making sure women are heard.”

Noella Milne is a Toronto-based partner in the Commercial Real Estate Group. She, too, stresses the importance of having – and being – a good mentor. “When you’re young, get a mentor,” she suggests. “Seek out a mentor that can give you the best feedback, help you and give you advice. You can’t do it on your own. And as the next generation

of female leaders, you have to mentor. What I've always tried to do is pick other women to mentor."

Moshiri agrees, saying that mentorship and sponsorship are crucial for women in any industry. "Mentorship is important for everyone – not just women – but what is even more important is sponsorship. Research suggests that women are under-sponsored as compared to men.

"Mentors support professional development, whereas sponsors support career advancement. Sponsors serve as champions and provide opportunities. Talk to anyone who has achieved career success and chances are they will tell you about a sponsor who made a difference in their career. It does not matter how good you are – no one can do it alone."

How things have changed

"When I started in law," Katherine Cooligan, regional managing partner in Ottawa recalls, "there were very few women partners. There were no women leaders. When I looked ahead, I saw men.

"Now when I look across the firm nationally, I see more and more women moving into leadership positions."

Cindy Clarke is a member of BLG's National Management Committee and the national group head for specialized disputes, overseeing more than 150 lawyers across four disputes groups. She stresses the good that comes from hiring and promoting more women into senior roles.

"It's important to focus on getting more women into that senior pool of partnership, and that is going to open doors. It's going to change the dynamic of all the committees. That is where you gain experience. Once you start sitting on various committees that is how you get opportunities for other leadership roles."

"Now we are seeing more women in leadership – you don't have to be the one woman," says Lynn McGrade, the regional leader of BLG's Investment Management Group and national leader of the U.K. Desk.

"You can be your authentic self, give the speeches the way you want to give them … women have a leadership style that might be a little bit different, but is valuable. So be confident, find your authentic self – and bring it!"

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