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Women in Leadership: A Q&A with Tonya Grindon

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Congratulations on recently being named to Baker Donelson's Board of Directors. How did you rise to this level of leadership within the Firm?

Thank you. I am so honored and humbled to be selected to the Firm's board. Rising in leadership has a lot to do with just raising your hand and showing a commitment. When I was a young associate at Baker Donelson, about 16 years ago I was interested in being on the Nashville recruiting committee. When the recruiting chair at the time asked me to join, I jumped at the chance. Six years later, I was asked to take over as chair of recruiting, and I immediately said yes. In 2008, I was asked to serve as group leader of the securities/corporate governance group and have served as the group leader since that time. I believe my efforts showed my commitment to making the Firm great at all levels of service, but also well prepared me for the greater challenges of serving on the Firm's Board of Directors.

What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level within a large law firm?

Female leaders have obstacles to overcome right out of the gate. To the point, one of the most compelling case studies on gender perception conducted by researchers at Columbia Business School, though 10 years old, still rings true. It is the Howard/Heidi study: real-life successful entrepreneur Heidi Roizen was profiled as herself and as a fictional Howard with exactly the same professional accomplishments. When the students reviewed Howard's resume they thought Howard would be an excellent person to have within a company because he was someone who got things done, was a team player and was very likeable. When students were asked to review the true owner of the resume (Heidi Roizen) they judged her to be more selfish (i.e., out for herself) and less desirable than Howard, even though she was viewed as being equally as effective. When I was an associate, a male partner called me "too aggressive" and "high maintenance" and my practice chair told me in my evaluation that I was sometimes perceived as "difficult." Perception can have a powerful impact on how we think and act. But don't get me wrong – I think being liked is very important to leading others; I just don't think you can get too hung up on it.

What advice would you give to an aspiring female professional?

The most important thing any young professional can do is to have an advocate who is vested in her success. If you have someone who will make sure you have good assignments and receive proper credit, and who will introduce you to people who will further your career, you will have so many advantages. But having powerful advocates isn't a given. Women need to earn it by demonstrating stellar performance and unflagging loyalty. My mentee knows that I will always be a staunch advocate for her. But she has earned my loyalty and respect by providing excellent services for our clients and showing an unflagging commitment to our practice group.

Are there any real no-no's when it comes to working your way up the corporate or professional ladder?

Don't be in it just for yourself. I've seen lots of attorneys torpedo their careers by not being team players. Plus, at the end of the day, I think working as a team toward a common goal can be much more satisfying than working alone.

Are there things businesses can do that would help them increase retention of promising female leaders?

Definitely – give your workers more flexibility. I completely agree with Anne-Marie Slaughter in her article from the July 2012 edition of *The Atlantic*, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," when she said that "Having control over your schedule is the only way that women who want to have a career and a family can make it work." The ability to be there for your daughter's musical performance or your son's Halloween party at school is priceless. And I have to say, the flexibility I have as a shareholder is tenfold to the flexibility I had as an associate. In our practice, there is really no such thing as required "face time." So long as you get the work done, make your hours and do a great job, you can craft a schedule that works for you. And I truly make no distinction between going home in the afternoon to let your dog out and going to pick up a child. Whether you are married, single, childless or have four kids, businesses need to understand that you have commitments outside of work. And if we allow you to meet those commitments, you will be a much happier worker.

Outside of the Firm, can you name someone you particularly admire and tell us why?

Hillary Rodham Clinton has been my role model since I was 20 years old. I've always admired her for her strong work ethic and ability to strongly advocate for what she believes in, even if it may be controversial. When Hillary Clinton was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2001, she became the only American first lady to hold national office. When she lost her bid for the presidency in 2008, she accepted the job as Secretary of State; in that position, she worked hard and became widely admired for her intelligence, drive and success. During her tenure as Secretary of State, Clinton used her position to make women's rights and human rights a central talking point of U.S. initiatives. To me, she exemplifies how hard work, strong convictions and perseverance pays off – and I believe women throughout the world stand to benefit from her efforts.