

## How Do Titans of Industry Plan To Achieve Gender Parity? Include Men in the Conversation.

By **Amanda Zablocki** and  
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In April, Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton hosted the 7th Annual Women Lawyers Group (WLG) Panel and Cocktail Reception at the New York Yacht Club. This year, the topic was “Titans of Industry on their Plans to Achieve Gender Parity.”

Gender parity is elusive in many industries, and the legal industry is no exception. As highlighted in the recently published April 2019 report by the American Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession, we have not made much progress, notwithstanding the fact that women have been graduating law school in equal numbers as men for the last two decades. In private practice today, women make up only 22.7% of law firm partners, only 19% of equity partners, and only 22% of senior management. The statistics are not much better for in-house counsel, where women account



for only 30% of the general counsels for Fortune 500 companies, and only 23.8% of the general counsels for Fortune 501-1000 companies.

To get to the bottom of this issue, we invited the leader of our law firm, which has historically done better than its peers in retaining and advancing women, and leaders from other industries to share their strategies for achieving gender parity. The panelists included

Guy Halgren, partner and chairman of the executive committee of Sheppard Mullin; Michelle Thatcher, SVP, global counsel, human resources and human rights, of PepsiCo; Brigadier General Peter B. Collins, executive vice president and chief operations officer of the Navy Marines Corps Relief Society; Dawn Riley, executive director of Oakcliff Sailing; and Renee Tirado, chief diversity and inclusion officer of Major League

Baseball. The panel was moderated by Amanda Zablocki, a senior associate at Sheppard Mullin.

A key take away emerged from this event: If we are to have any chance of achieving gender parity, men need to join the conversation and must ultimately become active partners in closing the gap.

As it turns out, women affinity groups, which have long catered only to women, can be the perfect platform for introducing men to the challenges facing women's advancement, and for empowering men to get involved and personally invested in the outcome. Sheppard Mullin's New York WLG is the perfect example.

Our WLG was initially run just like most law firm affinity groups. It held monthly meetings with the women attorneys, hosted a couple external happy hours and client events with other women professionals, and programming was generally based on the premise that the WLG should be a safe space for women. Consistent with that premise, for several years, the WLG had hosted an annual client event at a luxury retail store. Our female clients were invited to an evening of cocktails and fashion, which included access to the shoe department past hours and a generous discount off the ticket

prices. It was a beloved event that attracted many clients, and a great time was had by all. In 2012, though, we found ourselves in need of a new venue for our annual event. After attempting without success to replace one fashion house for another, we thought it might be time to try something different.

We asked ourselves, what if, instead of simply socializing, we actually talked about what was really on our minds? What if we were so bold as to turn our annual WLG client development event into a forum for highly successful and motivated professionals to actually tackle pervasive challenges facing women in the workplace, particularly those that seemed to transcend industry and skill set?

We knew it was a bit of a gamble. For this kind of cross-sectional event to be successful, we needed to find challenges that all women could relate to, regardless of vocation, and that could be discussed meaningfully in only one hour. In April 2013, we invited six women who achieved significant success in male-dominated industries from the auto industry to banking to share with the audience their answer to one simple question: Why did they stay? The panelists spoke to a captivated audience

about their personal paths to success, and the people and experiences that kept pushing them forward, despite all odds. It was evident that, even operating within vastly different organizations, these women experienced many of the same challenges.

As the panel discussion concluded that night, there was a burst of applause, followed by a crescendo of voices talking rapidly and excitedly as they left the room. Guests stayed long after the cocktail reception had concluded, bonding over shared struggles and triumphs, energized and empowered by the conversations they participated in that night. It was clear that the panel was well received, and that the conversation should not stop there.

After the success of that night, every year since 2013, the WLG has continued to host panel discussions designed to raise awareness and promote diversity and inclusion. Our discussions have focused on topics such as making the business case for the advancement and retention of women, owning and celebrating so-called female attributes, and bridging the generational divide among women in how they perceive and deal with challenges

facing women's retention and advancement.

Over the years, one common theme has emerged. When men are invited to our event and have an opportunity to listen to these conversations, it has a tangible impact.

Internally, our male colleagues have always been strong supporters of this event. From scouring their contact lists, to identifying potential panelists, to extending personal invitations to their clients, to attending the event in large numbers, our male attorneys have participated in our annual WLG event in many critical ways. The more of these WLG events our attorneys attend, the more sensitized they are to the challenges faced by women with respect to retention and advancement, and the deeper their understanding of the fact that these are not "women's" issues but rather are issues that impact the success of the entire enterprise.

In 2019, in large part owing to the incredibly favorable response we have received from the male attorneys in our office, we realized that the premise of keeping the WLG as an insular safe space for women was antiquated, and, quite frankly, ineffective. As such, we leaned into the male participation

component of our annual event, both internally and externally. Our event planning committee included both a male and a female attorney from our New York office. The Titans of Industry panel discussion featured two men, and the topic was intentionally gender-neutral. Of the approximately 130 guests that attended, a quarter of them were men.

During the panel discussion that night, the Titans of Industry panelists urged the audience to consider including men more in the conversation—early and often. As one panelist phrased it, "let them carry your water into the rooms you don't have access to." Perhaps, as another panelist noted, it is time for men to "lean in" to these types of conversations at work. Only through open and honest conversation across the board will we be able to finally untangle the stagnation in achieving gender parity.

As a follow-up question, the panelists were asked *how* can we convince men to lean into the conversation? Importantly, how do we empower them to get involved when achieving gender parity in the workplace has long been viewed as a "women's issue"? The panelists responded: We need to remind them it's not a "zero sum

game"; there is a tangible and well-documented return on investment for companies (and their employees, regardless of gender) when they decide to invest in diversity and inclusion at every level.

With any luck, these conversations will be less and less necessary in the coming years. Until then, we'll be busy planning our next panel discussion.

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