

# THE AMERICAN LAWYER

*By Eve Birnbaum, The Careerist*

## Tell Her She's a Star

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*Today's guest blogger is law firm consultant [Eve Birnbaum](#). A former corporate partner at Winston & Strawn, Birnbaum was also the legal director of the corporate practice at Proskauer Rose and global director of legal recruiting at Milbank Tweed Hadley & McCloy.*



She was a fifth-year associate at an elite New York firm who had just returned to work from maternity leave. With a new baby at home, her husband working 24/7 at another top firm, and the echo of “bad mommy” playing in her brain, she had to make a decision: Should she stay or should she go? Should she make the push for partner? And if she made it, would it be worth it? Though she worked directly for one of the senior partners in one of the firm’s major practice niches, nobody ever told her she was a star or on track to make partner.

That was me. But maybe that describes you too. Or one of your colleagues. Or one of your associates. I stayed, but only because the firm demonstrated its commitment to my advancement. The day I returned from maternity leave, the managing partner asked me what schedule accommodations I needed. He even gave me my own associate—a second year who reported exclusively to me. I worked through a second maternity leave and ultimately made partner.

All this came back to me when I attended a women’s leadership symposium at the New York City Bar. The panelists were each leaders of a “successful” women’s initiative: one from a law firm; two from accounting firms; and one from a major bank. They were each able to prove success in numbers—the

number of women who had advanced at the firm, and amount of business brought in by the women who participated in the initiative.

The panelists got buy-in from senior management for their initiatives in different ways. The law firm panelist shared her "shock and awe" campaign: A slide presentation that showed the low number of women in leadership positions at her law firm compared to those at competitors. An accounting firm leader opted for a different kind of show: Each slide displayed the name of a "high potential" woman who had left the firm in the last five years. It was about "women stars lost."

By articulating the goals of their initiatives in terms of lost potential, the financial services firms kept the focus on the firm, rather than the individual women. Here are three key components that made the financial services firms' initiatives successful:

1. **Coaching:** In addition to group programs, individual executive coaching was integral to each initiative, with the successful programs allocating an annual budget of approximately \$10,000 per participant.
2. **Accountability:** Participants were required to complete detailed reporting of plans, goals and progress, on a regular basis, to designated senior partners and executives. Each of the accountability senior personnel was charged with sponsoring, mentoring or other tasks requiring time and commitment.
3. **Business Development:** The women events were focused on opening new strategic business pipelines through the participating women at the firm, so that the business generated could not be attributed to others. Each of the women was also prepped and given critical resources (e.g., coaching, data) on how to develop her strategic relationships.

The financial services firms did not hesitate to limit their initiatives to an exclusive club of high-potential women. After all, meritocracy is part of the culture. Big Law, in contrast, has historically compensated its associates in lockstep by seniority. While some law firms are starting to be more open about which mid-level associates are "on track," they are averse to identifying their stars for a variety of reasons. Mostly it's because they don't want to lose the non-star associates (and their billables) sooner than the firm is ready for them to leave.

While several major law firms have recently launched select-group women initiatives, those programs are limited to junior partners or senior associates and counsel. Big firms still don't want transparency about their star mid-levels—and they are leaving in droves.

If law firms want to retain the best talent, they must overcome this aversion. Let's face it, the non-stars are going to leave the firm sooner or later, and they are not the future of the firm. A high-potential woman will attract committed sponsors and mentors and, with the right resources, will develop relationships that can translate into business.

The result is that firm is invested in her, and she is invested in the firm. She will be much more likely not only to stay the course (even if the course is a few years longer), but also serve as an entrée for new firm business.

And I can promise you this: She will be very loyal.

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