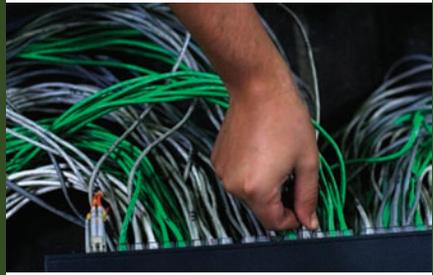


Law Firm
Management
and Economics:

Women on Top— The Woman's Guide to Leadership and Power in Law Firms

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Chapter 9

Mastering Law Firm Politics

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§ 9:1 Politics is not a dirty word

You can't ignore politics, no matter how much you'd like to.
—Molly Ivins

Leaders must get partners to act together, but they do not have the power to force them to comply. The power of law firm leaders is only “the potential ability to influence behavior, to change the course of events, to overcome resistance, and to get people to do things that they would not otherwise do.”¹ Politics is the way leaders use that potential power to achieve results. As Stanford Business School Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer explains, “politics and influence are the processes, the actions, the behaviors through which this potential power is utilized and realized.”²

Within law firms there is a continuous interplay between interests, conflict, and power. Lawyers practice in a law firm to serve their clients, make a living, and develop their careers. They join together because they prefer to have common structures, systems, and resources, which makes it easier for them than to practice on their own. They share interests in the firm, but

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¹Pfeffer, J. (1994), *Managing with power: politics and influence in organizations* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press).

²Pfeffer (1994), *Managing with power*.

sometimes their interests diverge. If the divergent interests are compatible and can be reconciled easily, most of their decisions will be rational and for the common good of the enterprise. However, when their interests clash, all bets are off. Partners exert whatever personal power they have and the power they can marshal from others in order to protect themselves and get their way.

The attempt to resolve the tensions among competing partners and interests is a political process. When individual or group interests diverge, politics is a means to reconcile differences through consultation and negotiation. To many ears, politics sounds pejorative and “dirty,” but it is necessary and common in any organization, especially in law firms where few people have the power to act alone. It is a natural part of every firm and is not an optional activity for law firm leaders. It has been said of firm politics that “Declaring yourself out of the game doesn’t get you out of the game. You can’t ‘not play’—you can only play competently or incompetently.”³

Since reconciling competing interests is part of a leader’s job, leaders must be politically savvy. Being respected for your competence is essential for a leader, but if we look at two equally competent leaders, “the one who has political savvy, agility in the use of power, and the ability to influence others will go further.”⁴ To be politically adept, a leader needs to understand what competing interests exist and be able to square individuals’ personal interests with the collective interests of the firm in order to protect and advance the latter. Political astuteness involves recognizing the political nature of the firm and knowing how to build a critical mass of support for something you care about, whether it is your personal goal or part of your leadership agenda. It acknowledges that people tend to do what they believe is in their best interests and that conflict can be a positive force for change and growth, but that it must be managed.

Many law firm leaders are slow to recognize the importance of firm politics. Several leaders who were interviewed noted that they could have been more effective sooner if they had understood more about the political nature of their firms. They started in leadership with idealism and political naïveté. One leader believed that the firm was a meritocracy; that partners were compensated on the basis of stated, objective criteria; and that

³Albrecht, K. (2006), *Social intelligence: the new science of success* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).

⁴Reardon, K.K. (2001), *The secret handshake: mastering the politics of the business inner circle* (New York: Currency Books), 2.

partners always acted in the firm's best interests. Another leader who was in charge of the committee to select new partners learned that final decisions were made by the biggest rainmakers in each practice group after discussions from which she was excluded. Yet another leader thought that if firm leadership committed to doing something, then it would get done and was surprised by the disconnect between words and action. Once these women gained leadership experience, they learned how the system really worked. Had they been less naive, they might have become more effective more quickly. Here are comments from two leaders about how they increased their political awareness:

- *I learned what really matters by becoming a leader. I sat in on compensation reviews for partners and associates and learned that there was a big difference between what partners say and what they really value. They listed 12 criteria/metrics, but only a few really counted: billings, hours, the kind of clients you have, and the margin of profit, so some work might be more profitable even if you work less because you staff more efficiently or have more leverage. You can be better compensated even if the total dollars brought in are less than another practice group.*
- *When I came up through the ranks, I chaired various committees, including the committee to select new partners. At each step, I did not have access to the people with "real power" who were making decisions, pulling strings behind the scenes. When I became managing partner, I realized how many discussions had been held without me about which associates to elevate to partnership. They're the most powerful people in the firm because they control most of the business. I didn't know how involved they were before. I had to push my way into their discussions—now I'm in a position to do it. They're including me in decisions for the first time.*

In a law firm, where every partner is a leader, "[e]ffective leadership lies in recognizing other leaders' interests, understanding them in all their complexity, influencing them, and then finding modes of action that will satisfy those interests while achieving desired organizational goals."⁵ In order to be politically savvy, you need to know who the power brokers are and know them well enough to size them up. What are their agendas? What is important to them? What do they want and need? Who are your potential supporters or opponents?

On any issue, you must be able to anticipate what you will be

⁵Salacuse, J.W. (2006), *Leading leaders: how to manage smart, talented, rich, and powerful people* (New York: AMACOM).

up against and who can help you or stop you from succeeding. You may want to build alliances with partners who support your goals. If you know who your opponents are, you can develop strategies and tactics to overcome or neutralize their objections. Perhaps you want a position that is elected or appointed. Who should you have in your corner? If you want to get a new initiative passed, start a new practice area, or change the firm's bonus policy, whose support will you need and what will you have to do to procure that support? You need all this information in order to increase your ability to take effective action. How will you gather the "intelligence" you need to answer these questions accurately?

Answering these questions can be extremely challenging because of the complexity of individual interests and the many competing interests that arise between and among partners and the firm as a whole. These conflicts may just be about the partner's personal needs or desires, but they may also include those of the partner's clients, practice group, or team. Only when you fully understand what all the interests are can you develop approaches to influence and satisfy those interests while achieving desired firm goals. This is inherently a political process. It involves employing persuasion, building coalitions, enlisting ambassadors and champions, and engaging in lengthy, often tedious, discussions and negotiations.

All of these steps are essential to getting things done in your firm. Suppose you have studied every aspect of an issue and feel certain you know the best way to solve a problem that has been plaguing the firm, but you cannot implement that solution without the support of the group, many of whom are undoubtedly of different views. Even those who share your conclusion may challenge you about how you plan to implement the solution you suggest. You are unlikely to persuade opponents about a controversial new move with just a well-reasoned argument. You will need to take actions that are plainly political. The Washington, D.C. office managing partner of a large regional firm explained it this way:

Every organization has its own dynamic. To become politically savvy, you need to figure out the dynamic at your firm. What is the agenda of the people in your constituency, what drives them, what are their needs? How do you get people to work together? How do you get your objectives through? Even in my leadership role, I need to make sure that my objectives are aligned with those in higher leadership roles, those controlling firm-wide issues. The firm-wide managing partner and I coach each other regularly. We differ politically but respect our common goal for the firm.

One leader showed political savvy when she wanted to start a

new practice group. Over a period of years, she had done the groundwork to develop a “clean energy” practice in her firm. At some point, she felt that the firm had enough related business and interested partners to create a separate practice group. She felt that she should chair the group but a powerful male partner also wanted to be the chair. She knew that if he used his clout, he would get the position, so she found another way to maintain a leadership presence. She spoke to each of the other partners who would be in the new practice group and suggested that the group be led by a steering committee, not by one person. They all agreed and selected a 12-person steering committee, of which she is a member. Their collaborative governance has been so successful that other practice groups in the firm are thinking about switching to the same approach.

All firms have rules about how things are supposed to happen, like how lawyers are promoted or selected for leadership, the criteria for compensation awards, and who makes hiring and firing decisions, but sometimes the written or established rules have less relevance than who you know or who owes you a favor. This is where politics comes into play. Politics helps you get things done outside the rules. It means having the ear of people with power and influence to help you get what you want. It means being better able to gauge the impact that decisions and changes will have on other powerful partners, what their reactions might be, and how it will affect your chances of success. It ensures you are on “the inside track” and helps you come to sound conclusions because you have open and useful communication channels.

Even if you know the firm’s “official” rules, one big question is whether everyone plays by the rules. Many new leaders may be surprised by this question, yet you need to know whether rules in your firm are enforced uniformly, and if not, who follows them and who is permitted to deviate or ignore them. Because lawyers are constantly negotiating for what they see as the privileges that come with their status as partners or rainmakers, some lawyers play by a separate set of rules or feel entitled to be treated differently. This is often the case with partners who demand the largest office, insist on using certain associates when it is not in the firm’s or the associate’s best interests, or expect the firm to pay for their monthly parking. However, rules may also be applied inconsistently because some partners are simply more politically attuned to possibilities than others. They ask for credits, positions, or favors that others simply fail to request. Be sure that you understand which rules matter, which are merely suggestions, and which are not even expressed, and learn how to make all of those rules work for you.

To be an effective leader, you need to know how to go through established channels to achieve desired ends, but you also have to understand the firm's unwritten rules and use them to get things done. So how do you learn the unwritten rules? One way is by being in leadership. When you are in charge of a project or committee, you see things that you otherwise would not see; you learn how to deal with them and how the game is played. People interact with leaders differently than with other peers because they want things from leaders for themselves, their clients, or other people whom they favor. You learn that while some partners ask for nothing and are taken for granted, others demand—and often receive—outrageous preferences. At first this may be shocking, but you soon learn how firm leaders deal with these demands and how they determine whether a partner is creating sufficient value for the firm to warrant special treatment. You learn that what you believe to be a meritocracy values and rewards some achievements as more meritorious than others.

If you obey all the rules, you miss all the fun.

— Katherine Hepburn

§ 9:2 Reciprocity

The politics of leadership often involves reciprocity: the principle that if you do something for someone, they will return the favor. We hear it in many common sayings, such as “One good turn deserves another.” We see it when we walk down the street and smile at an approaching stranger; most likely she will smile back. This principle has a social basis and is found in virtually all societies.¹ Reciprocity facilitates transactions among individuals and across time because it means that individuals are obligated to repay what they have received. It is commonly called a “favor bank” because it involves an exchange of support or resources that can be banked, owed, or redeemed. But reciprocity is not a direct quid pro quo exchange. An immediate exchange of favors is not necessarily sought or desired, the extent of the future obligation is not specified at the time when the favor is granted, and the gift creates no specific expectation but rather a diffuse, generalized obligation.

Reciprocity—both in what you have to give and what you want to get—is a key factor in all relationships. It is manifested by doing a good turn, showing kindness, or providing help. When an-

[Section 9:2]

¹Cialdini, R.B. (Oct. 2001), *Harnessing the science of persuasion*, *Harvard Business Review*.

other person does something for you, you usually show your appreciation and automatically consider how you can help them. Similarly, when you show generosity and consideration to others, they think of you positively and are more willing to extend favors to you. You never know when you will need to ask another person for help, so it is a good idea to be generous with information, introductions, contacts, or anything else that will benefit the other person before you need their help. Unexpected favors can be especially powerful, as can hard-to-obtain benefits, whether it is an opportunity to take the lead on a high profile client matter or tickets to a sold-out concert.

Reciprocity can take many forms. Sometimes it involves making concessions to people who make concessions to us: if I concede a small point now, the other person will be more willing to concede to me later. Sometimes it is putting people in a better position: if I give another person a chance to look good, they will likely return the favor one day. Sometimes it is making an important introduction: if I refer a client to another lawyer, that lawyer may send business to me. One leader I interviewed described how she used reciprocity: *“When I needed help for an important client in a legal area that I didn’t know, I went to a partner on the management committee who practices in that area. I did it to raise my visibility with him. We are in different practice areas Now he knows me, and maybe he’ll reciprocate when he has work for one of his clients that I can handle.”*

In a political context, reciprocity is used to support desired ends. Just as in government politics, law firm leaders have particular proposals, decisions, or policies that they want to enact or prevent. Supporting Partner A on one measure may persuade her to support your position on the next. If Partner B opposes your position, you may be able to offer her something that will get her to back off and take no position.

As a leader, you are in a prime position to be helpful to others. Learn what key people need to get their projects implemented, and let them know what you can do for them. At the same time that you are helping them, you are also laying the groundwork for help with your own future needs. In a sense it is a bargaining process: what can you give them if they support you on this? Understanding what is most important to people in the firm allows you to decide what to offer as well as when and whom to press on certain points.

As with any leadership technique, reciprocity should not be overplayed. It is not about keeping score or being obvious in granting or asking for favors. When it works well, it is a subtle,

barely noticeable process. Also, if you do too many favors, too often, they may become off-putting or lose significance. One managing partner who did a great deal to help one of her partners described what happened when he began to take her support for granted. It also shows the way a leader can exert power to help or hinder another's career: *"This guy is someone I championed. I traded many favors to get him into the partnership. I hired him, got him elevated to partner, then to equity partner. I made sure his compensation was high."* The managing partner expected that he would appreciate her help and behave in a way that would make her proud of him. Instead he became arrogant and demanding, and angered other partners. She felt that he was not holding up his end of the bargain: *"I'm the one with credibility and power; I can choose to keep or expel him; I have a tremendous impact on his career. He needs my support, and I know it. When he started acting like a jerk, I simply stopped advocating for him. That gave others the signal that it was OK to tell him to go."*

Many women fail to use reciprocity as a political tool. They are hesitant about asking for favors from colleagues in the firm, and they are willing to do favors for others without expecting any sort of payback. For example, women agree to take on time-consuming responsibilities or assignments even though it takes time away from their own work. Someone who wants your time should be willing to give you something in return, but most women do not use such requests as a bargaining chip; they do not treat their time as a valuable resource that can be traded for something else.

Two other points to remember about reciprocity. First, you must collect in a timely fashion. Otherwise, the reciprocity principle fades, and it will be less persuasive when you ask for a favor later. Second, while most people will naturally reciprocate according to the norm, some do not. They merely exploit those who are generous. If you do a good turn for someone who fails to assist you in return, you should resist when they ask you again or remind them that they owe you.

§ 9:3 Picking your battles

You only have a certain amount of political capital and do not want to squander it on unimportant issues. You need to decide when to speak up and when to stay silent, which projects to sponsor and which battles to fight. Regardless of how much or how little power you wield, you can have considerable influence over the policies and practices that are most important to you. You want to be a person whose opinions others care about, seek, and

listen to when they are making decisions. Sometimes timing is critical; choosing the right moment to raise an issue may make success more likely. On the other hand, taking a stand now may win you support on a particular issue but destroy your ability to achieve more important long-term goals.

This is why it is important to be clear about what matters the most to you, and to think politically and strategically. When dealing with controversial issues, consider:

- What do you care about and how important is it to you?
- What do the power players in the firm care about and how important is it to them?
- What do your constituents care about and how important is it to them?
- Can these various interests be reconciled? If so, how?
- If the interests cannot be reconciled, what are the risks, benefits, and likely results of supporting each position?
- Are there events, conditions, concerns, or other factors within the firm, in the marketplace, or pertaining to certain clients that have a bearing on the controversy?

In addition to the political calculations that all leaders must make, women leaders often come under pressure to give top priority to issues of special interest to women. As noted previously, most women leaders want to support other women but not necessarily on every issue. They may have to take positions that displease women constituents, or they may have important priorities on their agenda besides those of special interest to women. Sometimes two interests which may both be important to women compete for limited resources, and leaders have to choose between them. As one leader, a woman of color, pointed out, *“It’s good to be empathetic, but too much empathy can be dangerous. You get swept up in other people’s issues. You cannot fight every battle. You only have so many chits to play. For example, part-time is important to some people but not to me. I don’t want to focus on it. Diversity is what I care about. I can’t be all things to all people.”*

§ 9:4 The power of networks

In organizations, real power and energy is generated through relationships. The patterns of relationships and the capacities to form them are more important than tasks, functions, roles, and positions.

— Margaret Wheatley

The importance of networks cannot be overstated. Research

shows that belonging to successful networks is crucial for women to achieve leadership and that exclusion from influential networks holds women back.¹ The inability to access such networks serves as a barrier for women trying to achieve leadership roles and it persists for women even after they become leaders. Women lawyers experience exclusion and isolation far more than their male counterparts. An ABA study found that 60% of white women and 62% of women of color—but only four percent of white men—feel excluded from formal and informal networking opportunities.² In a 2009 study by the Minority Corporate Counsel Association more than 25% of women partners said that they experienced exclusion from informal networking opportunities. This was the highest exclusion rate of any demographic group surveyed.³

Networks are critical to your ability to become a leader and to be effective as a leader. They give you access to resources and information, and to people who can make things happen for you—whether getting you the right work assignment, introducing you to a potential client, or influencing the amount of your compensation. They also put you close to powerful partners, and that proximity confers power to you by putting you in the center of communications, social relations, and decision making. Having a broad network of influential people means that you are well connected and those connections give you the ability to get what you need to produce the results that you want. The power derived from your network relationships can help you advance your leadership aspirations, your agenda, and the firm's business goals.

Networks are based on relationships formed for different reasons, personal as well as professional. Within the firm, the quality of your relationships—your social capital—determines how quickly and how high you move into leadership. If powerful partners support you, you will be able to call on them for information, expertise, ideas, assistance, and support, and your entry

[Section 9:4]

¹Schipani, C.A., Dworkin, T.M., & Kwolek-Folland, A. (Jan. 2009), Pathways for women to obtain positions of organizational leadership: the significance of mentoring and networking, *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 16(1).

²ABA Commission on Women in the Profession (2006), *Visible invisibility: women of color in law firms* (American Bar Association).

³Minority Corporate Counsel Association (2009), *Sustaining pathways to diversity: the next steps in understanding & increasing diversity and inclusion in large law firms*.

into leadership circles will be faster and smoother. Without that kind of support, you may go nowhere.

Networks are powerful because they give you both the means to get ahead and rewards for getting there. Politically savvy leaders cultivate personal relationships with partners, especially those who are power brokers, within their practice and office and throughout the firm. When they get appointed to leadership roles as a result of those connections, it gives them higher status and also reflects the fact that they have powerful friends—which reinforces their image as a powerful partner. Then they use their power to have their followers appointed to important positions, which further expands their influence in the firm. As their influence grows they are rewarded with new opportunities for leadership that enable them to advance even further.

The problem is that the most powerful partner networks in law firms are populated and controlled by men. They go out for lunch together, play golf or poker together, and belong to the same clubs. While some men deliberately exclude women, most of the time they are simply more comfortable in these settings with other men. In addition to the strong bonds that form within a powerful group of men, many men are uncomfortable having to watch what they say and do when women are nearby. New male leaders fit in naturally; they are “one of the guys.” Moreover, their gender does not call their qualifications into question as it does for women. Because men are presumed more likely than women to succeed as leaders, the men who are in these networks and who control the law firm tend to channel career development opportunities and support to other men—thereby facilitating male success and creating self-fulfilling prophecies that validate their thinking and perpetuate male dominance.

Men have used networks this way to build and hold onto power for generations. Women do not have the same power base—yet. Women must find ways to get into leadership networks and then use their positions to expand opportunities for other women. It has been said that women’s networks have deeper but fewer relationships, while men’s networks are shallower but more expansive. Women need both kinds of networks. It is good to have a small circle of several close friends and clients, but you also need broad networks with many contacts. You have to have a wide spectrum of network contacts who can help you in many different ways, from finding a dog walker to introducing you to a new CEO.

One of the reasons women’s networks are more limited than men’s is that women think of relationships in terms of friend-

ships and they do not like to impose on their friends. However, in a business context, networking relationships are based on reciprocal benefits, not friendship (even when the people involved are friends). Networking relationships are more transactional than personal. They are a manifestation of the reciprocity principle because both parties recognize that they can potentially benefit from the relationship. They are not exploitative because each member of the relationship respects and helps the other. Good networkers always look for ways to do something helpful for the other person, but they also realize that in business, once a relationship forms, people regularly extend favors and seek favors in return. The connections between them do not have to be very profound or personal; they may be purely professional or social. However, once you have demonstrated your helpfulness or willingness to help, it is not an imposition to ask the person for an introduction, a committee appointment, or a vote. Therefore, from a political standpoint, you want people in your network—and you want to be in the networks of others—who are in positions to provide, or provide access to, the kinds of support, information, opportunities, people, and influence that you need now or in the future.

Belonging or having direct access to powerful networks is necessary in order to carry out your leadership responsibilities. Your power as a leader is to a large extent a function of your links to the powerful individuals in these networks. They are the partners who make decisions about firm issues through informal conversations and activities behind the scenes long before other partners meet to decide. If you are excluded from these networks, it will be hard to wield your authority or even to maintain a perception that you have any significant authority. On the other hand, if you are well connected and can exert your influence in and through these networks, you can increase your credibility as a leader and your span of influence within the firm. You can lobby thought leaders and power brokers directly and solicit their help to get your policies adopted, your decisions implemented, and your goals achieved. Networks can leverage your knowledge and effort by serving as vehicles for directing communications, coordinating efforts, and sending signals to your partners about what they need to do, how to behave, and which initiatives and goals have the highest priority.

Networks are also important sources of influential mentors and champions for women leaders. Both female and male mentors can provide inside information, contacts, and political support that make women leaders more readily accepted, admired, and effectual. However, so long as men control the power structure in

law firms, having senior male mentors is especially important for women leaders. One of the greatest benefits of having a male mentor is gaining access to his network.

There are many formally organized networks that you can join, like internal affinity groups, college and law firm alumni associations, bar associations, and professional organizations. Some require certain professional qualifications but many are open to anyone who is interested. Networks outside the firm can be sources of business, advice, leadership opportunities, and recognition for your leadership skills. These networks are useful because of the people you meet and the interactions that can lead to personal and professional opportunities.

Informal networks, especially those in your firm, are harder to access. Informal networks are simply webs of relationships with no formal structure. Members share common interests, experience, or concerns, know who else is a part of the group, and may socialize together, but they do not necessarily hold meetings or have a list of members. They operate through personal relationships, outside the structures of committees, practice groups, or other organizational units. Members share familiarity and a common understanding. These networks may be politically neutral (e.g., all lawyers who started at the firm together), but the ones that matter for leadership are those that control decisions, policies, and strategy in your firm.

Those networks represent the inner circles of power, and women have more difficulty than men gaining entry to them. In many cases, the door to those inner circles opens up to women only after they achieve a high level of authority in the firm. When doors do open, they are only slightly ajar, and even women who manage to enter may still not be fully accepted. One managing partner I interviewed who attended a two-day, firm-wide management committee meeting learned on the morning of the second day that the other committee members—all men—had gone out together the night before but had not invited her. Although she was a part of the group at one level she was excluded from full membership.

Gaining access to powerful networks is one area where you cannot afford to wait for an invitation. You have to be highly conscious of the importance of networks and connections and willing to push open the door and take your seat at the table. This requires thinking about networking strategically. An expert on strategic networking notes that, “It’s less about working the room

and more about being in the right room.”⁴ One bold technique is simply to invite yourself into that room—repeatedly if necessary. When the men meet alone, call them on it. When you have the clout to insist on being included, use it.

Another approach is more political. Networks operate in many ways as barter systems where knowledge, resources, favors, or other valuables are exchanged. To gain acceptance, you need to have something that members of the network deem worth trading. Most often, this involves power, and most power is based on client relationships and revenue generation. But there are other factors that may make you attractive to a network, such as having the loyalty of an important constituency, having highly specialized and desirable legal expertise, or having control over vital resources (e.g., information, contacts) or groups (e.g., a key practice group or committee). Your own external networks may be valuable consideration if they enable you to offer your partners access to important people in the community or the profession. Whatever leverage you have should be used to make and strengthen connections to members of the networks that matter to you. Use those connections to break through the barriers and into those networks.

§ 9:5 Building alliances and coalitions

As a leader, you need allies you can trust and rely on for guidance, advice, and support. Allies are helpful in any situation, but when you are dealing with issues that are especially sensitive or controversial, having allies behind you is essential. Successful leaders have allies, both women and men, who will support them in their ordinary work and to whom they can turn in a crisis. Allies are trusted advisors who will tell you the truth even when it hurts. They are individuals who bolster your strength when you have to push back against clients or partners whose actions have the potential to impede your objectives or erode your self-confidence. Allies are your champions and defenders. They can serve as diplomats, messengers, catalysts, conciliators, or almost any role that supports your agenda.

Leaders cultivate their closest allies through shared interests and long-term relationships. They identify and do favors for partners whose help they might need in the future. As a leader, you may have the authority to hire or appoint people to key posi-

⁴Rhys, G. (June 2009), Being in the right room: networking professionally for professional women, *The Glass Hammer*, <http://www.theglasshammer.com/news/2009/06/23/being-in-the-right-room-networking-professionally-for-professional-women/>.

tions where they can be of help to you; push through a promotion for someone who will support your agenda; or bestow resources upon someone, for which they will remain grateful. The people you help should be reliable supporters for you down the road.

Some controversial issues are best handled by forming coalitions with influential partners and groups in the firm. Coalitions arise when groups of individuals unite and cooperate on specific issues, events, or decisions or to advance particular values and principles. They consist of people in formal or informal groups who unite for a single purpose because they have a shared interest or stake in a specific outcome even though their goals and interests may vary greatly on other matters. Coalitions are based on mutual dependency and exchange. They are often short term or temporary, forming around a particular issue or set of issues and then disengaging. Therefore, to be effective, the force that unites them must be unambiguously articulated and the goal must be agreed upon.

Coalition building is an important strategy for advancing interests, power, and influence in the firm. If your position is weak, having a coalition behind you gives you broader support. If you are in a position of strength, it helps you to consolidate your power. An example of a successful coalition was described by a lesbian leader who wanted her firm to change its partnership agreement, which required that in order to inherit a partner's interest in the firm, a survivor had to be legally married to the partner. One group of supporters who helped her push through this change was composed of unmarried heterosexual couples who had the same interest in extending benefits to their life partners.