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"Let's Play Follow the Leader—Hiring and Retaining Women at Firms Should Be a Priority"

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It's too bad Jim Copeland isn't a lawyer. Copeland is the CEO of the Big Five accounting firm, Deloitte & Touche, which recently announced a new wrinkle in its much-heralded women's initiative: doubling its percentage of female partners by 2005.

A pretty gutsy move, considering that less than 10 years ago, Deloitte was where many firms are today: they were hiring men and women in equal numbers, but after six to eight years, only two women remained for every three men in the same hiring group, according to its Web site. The partnership ranks were even less feminine, with women making up a mere 5.5 percent of the firm's partners, its Web site says.

To be fair, women are better represented in the partnership ranks at most major Texas firms. According to a survey last year by Texas Lawyer, 17 percent of the partners at the 10 largest law firms were women, up from 13 percent in 1995. [See "Women Lawyers Make Strides at Texas Firms - Slowly," Texas Lawyer, Nov. 27, 2000, page 44.] Still, those are pretty paltry numbers, considering the rate at which women have been entering the profession.

Clearly, the problem is more than just a numbers game. A woman entering the legal profession today has a better-than-ever chance of leaving it within a few years. The same can't be said of men.

The reasons are many and varied, and anybody looking for a magic bullet, that one cure-all for the women-retention problem, is sure to be disappointed.

Which is why it takes something drastic, something like what Deloitte & Touche did, to make a meaningful difference.

Deloitte was tired of losing the women they had invested so much money and time in training, according to its Web site. So they brought in Catalyst, a New York-based consulting firm, to help them divine what was driving women out of Deloitte, according to The Washington Post. Catalyst found that Deloitte had a culture that offered women few opportunities for advancement and little flexibility to deal with family needs, Deloitte's Web site notes.

Less Turnover

In response, Deloitte created an ambitious program geared to changing the firm's numbers. It included everything from examining who worked for what clients, mentoring, maternity (and paternity) leave, flexible and part-time schedules, you name it. And it worked.

Women now comprise 18 percent of Deloitte's partners, and turnover is down, according to its Web site. The firm estimates that reducing turnover at the senior manager level by 1 percent is worth about \$5.5 million to the firm each year.

Now, according to CEO Copeland, Deloitte is looking to rejuvenate its efforts because, he says, they seem to have stalled a bit. And there's nothing like announcing to the work (via, among other outlets, the Washington Post and CNNfn) that you plan to double the number of women in your partnership ranks by 2005 to light a fire under your feet.

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And, just as in the world of accounting, women aren't going to make meaningful advances in the legal profession until somebody, some major firm, makes the retention and advancement of women a major priority. That includes dedicating some real resources to it.

It should be pretty clear by now, particularly with associate salaries at near-surreal levels, that losing the talented lawyers we worked so hard to woo batters our profits. Replacing lost lawyers isn't just inconvenient, it's expensive. And clients hate turnover, too.

What Deloitte has that the legal profession doesn't have—yet—is a powerful figurehead, preferably a male figurehead, who will step up to the plate and make this happen. (After all, who's surprised, or moved, when a woman extols the virtues of retaining other women?)

I'm sure Copeland isn't the one poring through the data and interviewing former Deloitte employees about why they're leaving. But he's the one setting the corporate tone. When he goes on national TV and tells the world that, by golly, Deloitte is committed to staying on Working Mother's list of best places for women to work (where it's been for seven years), there's no doubt among the troops that the company has declared this a priority.

So gentlemen, we're waiting. Any takers?