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Q&A with Laura Woods

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Laura Woods previously practiced as a partner in the labor and employment group of a full-service firm in Kingsport, Tennessee. In 2011, she joined Care Centers Management Consulting, Inc. as vice president of legal affairs. In that capacity, she assists clients in the areas of risk management, best practices recommendations and management of litigation and administrative actions.

Can you tell us about the various leadership positions you have held throughout your career and the basics of how you achieved those positions?

Presently, I am chair of the Leadership Kingsport Council, which oversees the main leadership program for the Kingsport Chamber of Commerce. I am also co-secretary of the Health Law Committee of the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC). I have also had the privilege of chairing the Chamber's youth leadership program, S.H.O.U.T.!™ and continue to be involved in that program with a social media awareness presentation for the participants each year. The Chamber's Keep Kingsport Beautiful program allowed me to serve as chair a few years ago as well. When I was new to the practice, the Tennessee Bar Association's Young Lawyer Division's then-president Jonathan Steen tapped me to head up a new committee – the Law Student Outreach Committee.

One philosophy I hold dear is that you must be a community trustee – getting involved in organizations, serving on boards, volunteering at events, raising awareness, whatever you can do with your talents. Living in a smaller community, taking this philosophy to heart means that eventually you get asked to take on leadership roles. When I was in private practice, many attorneys in my firm were very active in community organizations, and that is probably where I was first introduced to the world of community trusteeship. I completed the Leadership Kingsport program during those early years of practice, which exposed me to many different opportunities to volunteer and become involved. I have found that once you become involved with an organization, it becomes easy to find other avenues, methods and levels for investing your talents elsewhere as well. Additionally, being social helps – I met one of my dearest friends, who is also one of the most connected people in our area, at a small music venue when I had first moved back to Kingsport. He has opened so many doors for me, including corralling me into co-hosting a local television show that just entered its 12th season.

Taking on a leadership role sometimes happens because the organization is new or just getting started. I became involved with the Health Law Committee the first year it was offered at ACC. By the second year of its existence, I had been asked to serve as co-secretary and had assisted in coordinating one of the committee's continuing legal education programs at the ACC's annual meeting. Although I had not specifically expressed interest in becoming more involved in a leadership capacity, the leaders of the committee saw that I was active with the committee (I attended the conference calls, responded to surveys and email inquiries, and the like). Since the committee at that time was relatively small, I was fortunate to have name recognition with the current leadership early on, and that spring-boarded into more opportunities to serve.

Having been a partner at a law firm and now in-house counsel, what challenges do you think law firms face in connection with attracting and retaining promising female leaders?

A huge challenge is providing meaningful opportunities to lead within the firm – and that could be said for any

leader, regardless of gender. If you have a committee in name only, that quickly becomes obvious and can build resentment. The traditional firm structure can create impediments to keeping leaders happy. If a firm does not have a structure in place to support multiple leadership opportunities, then firms can always consider encouraging those leaders to look outside the firm for the leadership fix, and acknowledging those who take on the outside responsibilities instead of resenting them for the time the roles take away from billable time.

What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level either within a law firm or in your current industry?

One big challenge can be finding a mentor. We as a gender are making great strides into the senior level corporate world and in firms, but there are still trails to be blazed. Finding someone who has gone before you, or who has worked her way up the corporate ladder, can still be difficult. Even finding someone similarly situated can be a challenge, especially in smaller communities such as where I live and work.

What advice would you give to an aspiring female professional?

You should always have someone within your organization that you admire and can model yourself after. If you look around and can't find that person or people, then you probably are with the wrong organization. I think it is natural to always be looking for ways to improve, to feel as though you have the opportunity to grow professionally. You want to have someone to whom you can look and admire how he/she handles certain situations, dissects difficult issues, manages his/her employees and creates opportunities for growth.

Another piece of advice I would offer is to keep a work-life balance. It is easy to allow your job to define who you are, to become your identity as a person. And reining that in is easier said than done. But it is something I challenge myself to do on a constant basis. I make an effort to unplug from my work email each evening after a set time (usually once my husband and I are both home) and on the weekends as much as possible. There will be times when a project dictates that you work more on the weekends than you normally would, but I work for those weekends to be the exceptions, not the rule. I try to maintain an active role in the community in positions that aren't necessarily equated with my profession as an attorney or my position at my company. It's also important for me to have friends who are purely social friends, not friends you have because you work together, or are in the same bar association, etc.

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

Do not undermine anyone in your organization. If you have a problem with a situation or an individual, try talking to the person involved before escalating the issue.

Can you name someone you particularly admire and tell us why?

My mom. Maybe that was a predictable answer, but she is the correct answer for me. She has taught me the importance of working hard, of valuing who you are and not allowing anything to compromise your principles, and of exhibiting patience. I have a LONG way to go on that last one.