

Thinking Ahead: Moving Young Lawyers into the Leadership Pipeline

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A few days before General Motors' historic June 1, 2009, bankruptcy filing—the fourth largest bankruptcy ever—Tricia Sherick, a junior partner in Detroit's Honigman Miller Schwartz and Cohn, stood in a venue on the automaker's Warren, Michigan, Technical Center campus. Her job: She was about to address a crowd of 100-plus, many of them GM executives, to train them on the fundamentals of bankruptcy.

“It was a very large room with a lot of people in it, all looking at me, which dawned on me right before the training session started,” Sherick recalls. Asked if she felt pressure from the enormity of the task at hand, she replies: “Yes, but I think I also felt the power of being organized, having a well-thought-out plan, putting that plan forward and training these people on what they were about to confront. It was a very gratifying experience.”

How did a 36-year-old who had only recently made partner end up in such a major spot? Several months earlier Sherick had been selected to work closely with a senior GM executive to deal with the purchasing and supply aspects of the bankruptcy so that the company could continue to produce cars during its bankruptcy. She and the executive set up a 24-hour command center to handle calls from suppliers all over the world regarding the financial proceedings and their ramifications. “It was important that we were all firing on all cylinders,” she says and then laughs. “No pun intended.”

Sherick was thus entrusted to lead the 30-lawyer Honigman team to help this very important client through an unprecedented fiscal crisis. But to their credit, Honigman partners had proactively groomed Sherick for that and other leadership roles.

“I was fortunate to work with senior attorneys who sought out opportunities for me to work on increasingly more complex matters,” Sherick says, adding that the firm has a formal mentoring program. Her mentor was Robert Weiss, who leads Honigman's commercial/bankruptcy group.

“Everyone has a mentor,” she says. “It's important to have someone who has successfully gone before you—not only with the everyday trials and tribulations of being a young lawyer in a large law firm but also to develop clients, learn business development skills, and to understand how to get involved in the community, an emphasis at our firm.”

Such mentoring efforts build leadership pipelines for the future, and forward-thinking law firm management is smart to do so. Sherick's development is clearly a case in point.

Two years ago Honigman commissioned a diversity assessment, and as a consequence, the partners decided to focus





on their professional development program, recruiting and retention efforts. When they realized they needed to develop a core competency model, they chose Sherick to co-chair that task force.

Then, after a year-and-a-half of work, the task force rolled out its core competency system, and one of the outcomes was the creation of a new position—the attorney development partner for the firm. They selected Sherick to fill that role.

“It entails a lot of responsibility,” she says. “I oversee the firm’s professional development program for associates and nonequity partners, oversee our recruiting program and work with our hiring partner, and I oversee the evaluation process. In this role you have to be creative, manage a team, and understand what it’s like to work with firm management and practice group leaders. And we have great leadership.”

The effervescent Sherick is demonstrating she’s not only good at managing people but that she likes it. It’s also evident that firm management likes her, too.

“Tricia has proven herself as a leader in developing Honigman’s talent management process from its beginning as an idea through its implementation this past fall,” says David Foltyn, the firm’s chairman and CEO. “As a young attorney, she has tremendous management skills, making her a great choice to serve as our attorney development partner. We have many young talented attorneys and believe it’s important to provide them with opportunities to hone their skills to be leaders in the future.”