

BAR BULLETIN

KING COUNTY BAR

This is a reprint from the King County Bar Association Bar Bulletin
November 2021

Ladder Down: Professional Skills and Personal Connections

By Maia Robbins and Jennifer Aragon

On a Saturday morning in January 2021, twenty-five female attorneys from the Seattle area participated in a Zoom meeting. As I joined the meeting, I wondered whether it was more intimidating to walk into a room of twenty-five strangers or watch twenty-five strangers stare directly at me all at once. This first meeting took place virtually due to COVID, and during a time when I was feeling the impact of a lack of connection with the professional world outside my firm.

We were all there for our first meeting of Ladder Down, a year-long program for women attorneys in Seattle. The program is dedicated to leadership empowerment, business development, career development, and mentoring. Ladder Down sets monthly or bi-monthly meetings, wherein participants learn skills for accountability, client development, building a book of business, self-advocacy, and “paying it forward” by helping other women attorneys to reach their goals. I applied to Ladder Down because I sought answers to a question I have been considering since I began law school: How do I get to where these women are that I look up to so much? How do I reach that next-level in my career?

What is Ladder Down? Simply put, Ladder Down is a professional development program designed for women attorneys, which involves a thorough application and review process before their acceptance into the program. There is no minimum level of experience necessary,

and it is open to attorneys in any area, whether working in private practice, as in-house counsel, for the government, or in transition. Participants have a diverse range of personal and professional experiences, including different practice areas, personal background, and talents. As it states on the Ladder Down website: “Ladder Down participants must only share a common goal: be committed to changing their careers and the legal profession for the better.”

But Ladder Down is so much more.

The heart of the Ladder Down program lies in “large group” meetings, which Ladder Down participants attend together once per month. (Our cohort includes each of the twenty-five women staring back at me that first day.) The first group meeting began as an exploration into the personal and professional self. Before the first session, each participant took the Meyers-Briggs personality test and later took the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, and each person received a complete report of their results. Participants then learned from esteemed business coach Lynn Moran how to analyze their results and understand their particular strengths and conflict styles. As part of this exercise, participants also learned how best to communicate with clients, colleagues, and superiors at work. Subsequent large group sessions included a lecture series with women lawyer coach Marianne Trost on how to develop effective career and business development strategies that are key to advancing in one’s career and in becoming a “rainmaker,” or really, to build the career or practice

that is meaningful to each participant.

Intermixed with these lectures are question-and-answer panels consisting of different professionals: in-house attorneys (so participants can learn about fostering relationships with company counsel in private practice), former Ladder Down participants, and judges and other judicial officers. In all of the larger group sessions, participants were intermittently broken off into randomized breakout rooms of two to four individuals to build interpersonal relationships within the program and discuss the topics of the lecture.

These lessons share the common thread of asking each woman to take a good hard look at herself. Where does she shine in her professional life and where does she have opportunities for improvement? This exploration in a group setting offers the unique opportunity to share with other amazing women, and allows us to see our work reflected back at us in the insights of our group.

Over the course of the rest of the year, participant relationships have been further fostered through the “small group” breakout sessions. After the first “large group” session with all twenty-five attorneys, Ladder Down participants were randomly assigned to a “small group” of five or six attorneys that remained static throughout the year. These groups met a handful of times on separate days from the larger sessions. In these small groups, participants celebrated personal and professional victories, gave and received advice for issues at work, connected one another with

leads on referrals, and supported each other regarding personal challenges. We set personal and professional goals and held each other accountable for those achievements. The groups often centered around a theme that related closely to the most recent or upcoming large group session.

What do participants gain from participation? Like most things, participants will take from Ladder Down much of what they put into it. By design, the program provides training and tools to become a better communicator, firm leader, and networker, but in an intentional and goal-oriented way. Indeed, Ladder Down provides excellent career training, wonderful lectures, and a great resource for information and referrals. The diversity of the practice areas of the women involved is an excellent resource when an issue arises that is outside your own professional focus.

Through its programming, Ladder Down has given me the tools to become the professional leader I aspire to be. I have learned skills for how to become a leader both at my firm and as an attorney generally that might otherwise have taken years to acquire. And often-times the course has taught me how to take skills I already have and use them to advance myself in my career. As just one example, the multipart lecture series about how to become a “rainmaker”

has reminded me how important it is to stay in contact with my professional network and clients, and how to cultivate those relationships into future business for myself and my law firm. Using what I learned from that series and combining it with what I learned about myself through our personal-ity workshops at the beginning of the course, I see where I am on track and where I need to improve. Knowing I have the tools to succeed gives me the confidence I need to employ what I have learned and reach my goals.

But possibly even more valuable than the guidance by our lecturers is the network of successful female attorneys. I have gained not only mentors, but also friends and close confidants. As just one example of this close community, during my second “large group” Ladder Down session, I got a call from my father that I needed to come to the animal hospital to say goodbye to our family golden retriever, who had suddenly and unexpectedly become terminally ill. Not wanting to interrupt the lecturer, I relayed this to everyone in the Zoom chat and apologized for leaving the session early. When I returned to my computer later that day, I had multiple emails from women in Ladder Down that I had never even spoken to personally, extending their sympathies. I was touched by the fact that these women

who had never even met me had taken the time to reach out. But that gesture is a true representation of the relationships that are made in Ladder Down: an unwavering support network of women that care equally about your personal and professional wellbeing and growth.

While “Ladder Down participants must only share a common goal: be committed to changing their careers and the legal profession for the better,” I have found the experience to be much more than that. The women with whom I have been sharing this experience are not only committed to their own careers, but they are also committed to me and my career. The skills I have learned will serve me throughout my career, but the connections and bonds that I have formed will last my lifetime, and will help me to pay it forward to other women attorneys in Seattle. ■

Maia Robbins is an associate at Corr Cronin LLP in Seattle where she practices both plaintiff and defense side civil litigation and white collar criminal defense; she can be reached at mrobbins@corrcronin.com. Jennifer Aragon is an associate at Forsberg & Umlauf; her primary practice area is insurance coverage defense, and she can be reached at jaragon@foum.law. If you would like to learn more about Ladder Down, please visit the website at <https://www.ladderdown.org/>.