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Success in law firm is hard but achievable, black women lawyers told

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In order to succeed in the law firm, women of color should stress being excellent, reliable and passionate instead of "networking."

And they should smile.

This was the advice that two successful black women gave on Tuesday to 35 lawyers and summer associates at Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP's "Leadership Institute for Women of Color."

"I really get ticked off if someone asks to network with you," said one of the speakers, Melody Hobson, president of Ariel Capital Management LLC.

"I rarely think about networking," added Andrea L. Zopp, senior vice president for Human Resources at Exelon Corp. and a prominent former prosecutor here.

If a lawyer aims at excellence, "You don't have to market or sell it, you just have to do it," Zopp asserted.

Both said women can expect to be overlooked or treated unfairly sometimes and should learn to get over it.

"I have had many experiences where people come in [at her company's office] and give me their coat," Hobson said.

"Then they sit down at the meeting, and I'm at the head of the table, and they're mortified."

Zopp said black women lawyers should keep their balance.

"Lots of stuff is going to happen to you that is not right or fair," Zopp said. "You've got to move on."

Here are some tips they offered for success.

- "When I was a litigator at Sonnenschein," Nath & Rosenthal LLP,

Zopp said, 30 seconds after something arrived on her desk "I was passionate about it.... When you're working with clients, they love that."

- "When somebody asks me to do something, they know it will get done," Zopp said. "You want to be the person who will get it done on time" and give regular reports along the way.

- "Too many people make mistakes and say '[stuff] happens,'" Zopp said. "[Excellence] is about saying 'it won't happen again.'"

- "Any time you build a relationship, it's not only what you can get from it, it's what you bring to it," Zopp said.

- If something prevents you from succeeding in your office, "you can't wait for them to fix it for you. Go somewhere else if necessary," Zopp said.

- "Be extremely upbeat" and "smile a lot," Hobson said. "It sounds goofy," but people will be more interested in what you say if you are upbeat than if you are "growling."

- When you go to a meet an important person, be prepared and plan in advance what you will say, Hobson said. "I hate when someone asks, 'So tell me about your career,'" Hobson said, implying that the person should already have that information.

- "A person of color is always being watched.... If I'm really good at something" the world will know, Hobson said.

- "Be curious" and have "a beginner's mind," Hobson said.

- When people say inappropriate things to you, "Assume the best" about people, "not the worst," Hobson advised. "Maybe they don't know what they're saying is inap-

propriate."

- "Trust yourself," Hobson said, adding, "Trusting other people goes a long way."

Zopp related an incident early in her career as an example of the importance of being excellent.

When she was a Cook County assistant state's attorney, she tried a major criminal case with a co-prosecutor who also was a black woman.

She said this perhaps was the first time that two black, female prosecutors had tried such an important case in Cook County.

"The judge abused us up one side and down the other," she said. "The defense lawyer was laughing."

The judge "was abusing us because he thought we were going to screw it up," Zopp said.

But it didn't turn out that way.

"We were awesome. We convicted everybody," she said. "Now he thinks I'm the second coming of the law."

She said that the judge still speaks highly of her and recommends her for appointments to boards.

Hannah Amoah, a first-year associate from Katten's New York office, was one of the lawyers who attended the event at the Arts Club of Chicago, 201 E. Ontario St. Amoah said the most difficult task for a black woman lawyer is that she has to work "twice as hard" to prove she is as good as other lawyers.

Amoah and senior associate Sonia K. Clayton-Pedersen said the minority associate committees that are organized in each Katten office make it easier for minority associates to bring their concerns directly to management.

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