

Elliott Davis Launches Forum For Women

Seeks to increase number of female partners.

Career development skills were the focus of “A Forum for Women,” a one-day seminar held in April for female professional staff of **Elliott Davis**/Greenville, S.C. (30 partners, 250 total staff; six offices). HR Director **Terri Herren**, concerned that female employees were not advancing as quickly as males, created the forum.

“When you notice a disparity in the number of women and men shareholders, you have to ask, ‘What are we missing? What do we need to give our women to help them advance?’” Herren explains.

Herren had read several books suggesting that women often do not get the same career guidance as men. Last June, she proposed a female-focused career management seminar to shareholder **Rick Davis**, who heads the firm’s HR committee. He e-mailed his approval that same day.

Herren’s request coincided with the July 2003 election of a new firm chairman,

Todd Mitchell, who is outspoken about his desire to improve the firm’s retention and promotion of women. “Only one of our 28 shareholders is female,” Mitchell notes. “At a time when more than 60% of accounting graduates are female, that is unacceptable.”

Mitchell kicked off the forum by noting that men often are not comfortable offering to mentor female colleagues. “There is a fear of being seen as having a romantic interest,” he explains. “No one talks about that concern, but in today’s litigious environment, men have to be careful.”

Speakers **Debbie Sessions**, partner at **Porter Keadle Moore**/Atlanta, and **Linda Travis**, principal, **The Brand Renovator**/Atlanta, acknowledged that problem. Their solution: Women should seek out mentors.

The speakers also advised participants to focus less on tasks and more on results, and they urged women to take profession-

al risks and to openly promote their value to the firm.

Herren worked with **Kim Bayne**, ED’s director of training and development, to design the program. Invitations for the post-tax season event were e-mailed in mid-March to the firm’s 80 non-exempt female personnel, and 63 attended. The event was held at Greenville’s Commerce Club, and participants earned six hours of CPE credits, at a total training cost of less than \$100 per participant.

Afterward, Herren e-mailed participants an outline of key points from the forum and encouraged them to use the recommendations as they set 2004-2005 goals. Goal setting is a part of ED’s annual review process.

Herren plans to make the forum an annual event. “This isn’t about work/life issues,” Herren says. “It’s about giving all our people the tools they need to advance their careers.” ■