



Courtney Dorman and Wilson Sonsini: When Leadership Style and Culture Align

As the oldest of her three children approaches his tenth birthday, Courtney Dorman, sitting in her office in Palo Alto, recalls that when she turned 10 she asked her parents for a navy-blue pinstripe suit. "I knew then that I wanted to be a business person, even though I didn't really know what that meant," says the Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati Senior Vice President. Dorman, who joined the firm in 2002 as director of marketing, became CMO prior to taking on her current role, which has her overseeing marketing and business-development; human resource functions, such as recruiting and professional development; and office administration except finance and technology. Still teased by her family for her precocious entrepreneurial spirit, Dorman attributes her business acumen both to her roots and to her upbringing, which took place mostly in Connecticut and New York: "My father grew up in Shanghai, a very business-focused culture. I think I inherited a lot of that from him."

When Dorman reviews her tenure at Wilson Sonsini, in her words, she sees "evolution." The firm recently welcomed a new CEO, the second to occupy that position since Dorman was hired. "While we have had two CEOs, both have been long-time Wilson Sonsini partners and the senior management of the firm has been consistent for many years, which has provided an enormous amount of continuity." Even so, with the installation of a new leader, she explains, the firm uses the opportunity to evaluate and, where possible, to improve its business and service delivery. Dorman's demonstrated commitment to the firm earned her a leadership role early on. As she became increasingly woven into the fabric of the firm, her growing responsibility included a central role in helping it navigate through management succession.

As the firm has evolved, so has she, Dorman says, describing some of the ways that she has developed both professionally and personally during her nearly eight years at Wilson Sonsini: "Learning to delegate did not come easily or naturally to me, and it took deliberate effort and practice. The job has required that I do it and I am very lucky to have an incredible team to work with," says a woman whose maturation as a professional required coming to terms with both perfectionist and workaholic tendencies.

Throughout her time at Wilson Sonsini, Dorman also has confronted a challenge that is familiar to many of her colleagues—combining a demanding career with a rich family life, which includes a pre-



Courtesy of Wilson Sonsini

teen and five year-old twins. Asked how her husband would characterize her demanding routine, Dorman replies: "I think he would say that I work really hard when I'm in the office, and I work really hard when I'm home." Friends and colleagues describe Dorman's boundless energy (her idea of relaxing includes taking long, arduous hikes), which she acknowledges is both a strength and a challenge in the perpetual quest to strike that balance.

What Dorman does at Wilson Sonsini today is very different from what she did when she first arrived at the firm. Presently, she is focused on working with the firm's management team and new CEO, Steve Bochner, on setting firmwide goals and strategic priorities. Bochner took over the job after John Roos was appointed United States Ambassador to Japan in August of 2009. One of Dorman's major undertakings these days is to support the firm's growth through its lateral partner recruiting and integration initiative. When she was hired, Dorman's primary task was to help build the firm's marketing function, she explains. Almost seven years later, when Roos proposed a new management structure for the firm, Dorman was given oversight of marketing and business development as well as of the firm's various human relations functions. Roos' objective was to consolidate the firm's management into fewer top-level positions that reported directly to the CEO and Board of Directors. The rationale behind Dorman's new position was to "streamline the various firm departments that dealt with people, since there is a logical connection among them," she says, adding, "John [Roos] wanted someone in that position who got the big picture and who had an understanding of what was going on in the Wilson Sonsini boardroom."

The reason she "got the big picture," Dorman says, is that from her earliest days at Wilson Sonsini, firm chairman Larry Sonsini taught her to listen, learn, and understand the organization. "I came in, as anyone coming into a new job, with a lot of ideas and strong opinions of how things should be done," Dorman recalls. From Larry Sonsini, she learned to slow down, appreciate and, most impor-

tantly, navigate, the firm's culture. "Any time you're dealing with an organization full of individual, successful personalities, you need to have an appreciation for the nuances of that culture before you go charging in to try and change things."

Several factors contributed to Dorman's being named a Vice President. Clearly, her commitment to and appreciation of the firm were obvious to her colleagues. But performing the role required strong managerial and communication skills, developed throughout her career and resulting both from her prior experience and from her own professional development. That experience has shaped her approach to team-building and professional development. In fact, she is the first to emphasize that she was able to take on additional roles at Wilson Sonsini only because she could count on a strong team that expertly handles the firm's day-to-day marketing function. "I'm very lucky to work with an incredibly talented, seasoned team that takes pride in what it does every day," she says. "They understand and appreciate the organization," she offers in praise of her team members.

Dorman's strategy to grow the marketing department never was focused on head count. When she joined Wilson Sonsini, the marketing team included 12 people; today, it has only six more team members. "But it's a different group of people, with a different set of skills. I don't believe in job descriptions or in putting people into boxes," she says. "I'm a believer that if you're good, smart, and have good ideas, you can make anything happen." Dorman expects as much of her team members as she does of herself. Their loyalty and quality delight her, but they also testify to a leadership style that works. A "working manager" who wouldn't ask anyone to do something she wouldn't do herself, Dorman cites how she benefitted from her own professional mentors—as well as the patience gained from her parenting experience—as important clues to how she developed a leadership style that has served her well in her own career development.

Her first job after college (she earned her sociology degree from Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania) was as an underwriter at AIG, Inc., followed by a similar position at Zurich American Insurance Co. Convinced that numbers-crunching was "not the best fit," Dorman eventually went to work at Edelman Worldwide in its Washington, D.C. office, where she was mentored by Michael Deaver, who had served as deputy chief of staff to President Reagan. When her primary client at Edelman, Bank Boston, acquired Robertson Stephens, a San Francisco-based boutique investment bank, Dorman was invited to become its director of communications. From there, she made her way to Wilson Sonsini in 2002. "The marketing function provides a platform to understand all the key components of a business," Dorman says, explaining what drew her to a career in marketing for professional services organizations. In Dorman's opinion, the key to a CMO's success lies not in possessing "a secret set of initiatives or activities," but in having the organizational know-how to implement and execute successfully. She also thinks it's critical, in her words,

"to understand the business, understand the client, and treat the firm's marketing budget as an investment in its growth."

Wilson Sonsini's unique "entrepreneurial feel" is what she loves most about working at the firm. "The Silicon Valley culture of creating and building on ever-expanding possibilities is a fascinating part of my job," she says, explaining that a lot of what Wilson Sonsini does is to help entrepreneurs take ideas from the "dreaming stage" to fruition. "Working in such a growth-oriented, optimistic, anything-can-happen environment is very rewarding." For example, Dorman and her marketing team were instrumental in launching Wilson Sonsini's Entrepreneurs College, a yearly seminar series presented by Wilson Sonsini lawyers since 2006 to help entrepreneurs sharpen and implement their business ideas. The undertaking draws on just about every facet of the marketing team, from online technology to public relations to business development. "The program illustrates the depth of the marketing department, and how it can help the firm achieve its revenue- and client-generation goals," Dorman says. A few years earlier, the marketing team had launched Wilson Sonsini's College for Clients, an initiative where the firm's lawyers teach their clients the tools they need to handle a variety of matters in-house. "As long-term partners with our clients, we want to give our clients the tools to do certain basic functions themselves," Dorman explains. Earlier this year, the firm unveiled a Term Sheet Generator that allows entrepreneurs and investors to generate an initial draft of a term sheet for certain stock financings—another example of the firm working to empower the client.

So what do Dorman's days look like now? "Steve [Bochner] is very focused on revenue," Dorman says. "His initiatives have us looking more deliberately at our client base, pursuing the right opportunities, and working with partners in the firm to figure out what directions we should be heading in." According to Dorman, a "top-down structure for business planning" is a new exercise for the firm. She has been working with the firm's management team and board to help propel the firm forward while ensuring that Wilson Sonsini respects meaningful historical practices and existing interpersonal relationships. "For any new tradition to take hold successfully, people can't view it as a threat," she says, displaying the sensitivity for the multiplicity of concerns that come hand in hand with inevitable change.

Dorman also currently is spending a lot of her time on lateral partner recruiting and integration. "We're very focused on growth, and a key part of that is bringing in new people and making sure they're well-integrated into the firm." When a new partner joins the firm, the sponsoring partner and management team spend a significant amount of time focused on how best to integrate his or her practice, identifying who needs to be a part of his integration and execution team, and making the right introductions within the firm. Dorman's involvement in the hiring plan, including crafting the internal and external messaging, orchestrating client introductions, and helping with staffing and additional support exemplify her wide-ranging responsibilities at the

ZG LEADERSHIP PROFILES

firm. And as she's quick to emphasize, "While I'm heavily involved in developing the plan and setting up initial meetings, the team steps in to make it all happen. I am involved in important checkpoints along the way."

A job like Dorman's has the potential to consume all of her time, and setting boundaries does not come easily to her: "Not to sound too pessimistic, but I'm not sure that professional/personal balance will ever exist. I do the best I can, but the demands are very intense on both sides," says Dorman, who attributes her ability to function in both realms to tremendously talented and supportive partners both at work and at home. And Dorman has learned to use her time wisely; she recharges her energy and feels her creative wheels turning during rare time alone, frequently during her commute or her early morning exercise regimen: "When I can carve out some free time, often at 5:30 in the morning, that's when I can really focus on new ideas. That's when I get to think outside the box."



Zeughauser Group is the firm of choice for legal industry leaders seeking to increase their competitive advantage and profitability, enhance market position, and strengthen organizational culture.

Ron Beard
beard@consultzg.com
949.360.0122

Jerome L. Coben
coben@consultzg.com
323.937.8195

Mozhgan Mizban
mizban@consultzg.com
415.868.0100

Norm Rubenstein
rubenstein@consultzg.com
202.483.7089

Jack Walker
walker@consultzg.com
323.664.2881

Mary K Young
young@consultzg.com
301.320.1518

Peter Zeughauser
zeughauser@consultzg.com
949.760.6800

Kent Zimmermann
zimmermann@consultzg.com
312.810.8008

Lonnie Zwerin
zwerin@consultzg.com
415.387.4623

consultzg.com

Copyright © 2010 Zeughauser Group LLC. All rights reserved. *ZG Leadership Profiles* is a marketing and informational communication sent to you electronically by Zeughauser Group LLC, 3701 Sacramento Street, Suite 444, San Francisco, CA 94118. If you would prefer not to receive future *ZG Leadership Profiles*, please write to Zeughauser Group at the address above, or email zgadmin@consultzg.com.