

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Faegre Baker's Kathy Noecker

Law360, New York (January 31, 2014, 1:19 PM ET) -- Kathy Noecker is a partner in Faegre Baker Daniels LLP's Minneapolis office, where she is a member of the firm's management board and serves on the firm's four-person executive committee responsible for worldwide operations. Previously, she has held various positions at the firm, including leadership of the labor and employment practice and nominating committee. She is also an advocate for increasing diversity in the legal industry and leads the firm's diversity and inclusion advisory group, which provides strategic direction for the firm's diversity and inclusion mission, vision and priorities.

A partner in the labor and employment group, Noecker advises employers on the complex and fast-changing array of workplace laws affecting businesses, with a particular emphasis on developing practical and systemic improvements to workplace legal compliance, advising global businesses on international and cross-border employment issues, and handling of sensitive executive employment issues and agreements.

Q: How did you break into what many consider to be an old boys' network?

A: My initial focus was to do great work. Before women can advance, they must prove themselves as top-notch lawyers. Be responsive to clients, listen to their needs, invest time to understand the client's business, and focus on finding solutions not problems. From early on, I had the advantage of excellent mentors who gave me opportunities to gain access to clients, participate in challenging projects and develop my skills. They were invaluable in my path to becoming a partner and a leader.

It's also important to be curious and demonstrate interest in the practice, while also taking time for yourself, friends and family. As I progressed in my career, I was genuinely interested in every project and had difficulty turning work down or asking for help. I benefited from having partners who went out of their way to help me balance work and family and who were great role models. Without their example and support, and enormous support from my husband, I'm not sure I would have survived some challenging years juggling a full-time practice and raising four children.

Finally, speak your mind. Clients hire lawyers who are independent thinkers, and firms need leaders who bring something new to the table. Speaking up is not always easy. However I learned that sharing my perspective with passion and conviction added value to our legal team, and my confidence grew over time.

Q: What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level within a law firm?

A: Serving in a leadership role can be challenging for men and women, though women leaders face

unique challenges because our numbers are still relatively small and the model of success as a leader in most law firms has historically been defined by men.

Being one of a small number of women in leadership can also be lonely, so it's important to identify and create communities where you can rejuvenate and energize. Fortunately, at FaegreBD this is becoming less of an issue; we have had great success preparing and promoting a significant number of women into leadership over the last several years — women now fill approximately one-third of our management board and practice group leadership positions.

As a leader, it's challenging to have patience and take time to bring people alongside you when you see where your organization is headed and you want to arrive there quickly — women often are particularly good at doing that. Lawyers don't like change, so convincing others your ideas are valuable can be particularly difficult in a law firm. You have to be flexible but hold on to your convictions and vision, be patient and recognize the little successes along the way. While it may take longer to reach a goal, in the end the organization will be stronger and have greater alignment.

It is a humbling and significant responsibility to be one of the most senior women in our firm. But it is also incredibly rewarding to be able to make a difference. It can be hard to recognize where my voice has mattered on a day-to-day basis because change happens slowly. But when I step back, I can see that me being present at the highest level has often steered conversations in a different direction. I know my voice has made a difference as we refine our vision, continuously adapt and improve the firm and, provide innovative service to clients.

Q: Describe a time you encountered sexism in your career and tell us how you handled it.

A: I honestly haven't ever encountered blatant sexism. Today, the obstacles women face are more subtle and often arise from a natural tendency we all have to be most comfortable with people who are like us and a lack of recognition of the value of different styles and skill sets.

About 10 years ago, a senior partner suggested to me that I should be named labor and employment group leader. His reasoning was that we had many female associates in the group and it would be beneficial for them to see a woman advance. While I appreciate he understood the importance of diverse role models, at the time I was stunned that he was unable to articulate substantive reasons for me to be promoted.

By the time I was named to the position, he had figured out that there were many reasons — other than my gender — that indicated I was qualified and would be successful leading the group. While I may not have met the traditional model of law firm leadership based on power, authority and status, I had other skills that would prove to be effective.

Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring female attorney?

A: I often tell associates that it's important to be themselves and to have confidence in doing so. We are at our best when we are authentic and draw direction, conviction and energy from our heart and gut. Use that energy to take on new challenges and ask for opportunities outside your comfort zone.

Build your network and view relationship building as part of your job. Women typically take on the larger burden at home and as a result they often want to stay in their offices to get work done, and they don't take time to network and develop trusted relationships with colleagues and clients that will help

them build their business reputation and practice.

As you advance, bring up others behind you. Your practice and leadership will blossom only if you have great people on your team who will go the extra mile, for you and with you. Developing and being part of a strong team will drive long-term growth and success.

Finally, have fun.

Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase the number of women in its partner ranks?

A: Role models are so important to retention and advancement of talented people. Everyone feels more welcomed and valued when they see others like them in positions of influence. In order to advance more women to leadership, leaders need to be intentional about sponsoring women, giving them significant and meaningful client opportunities, building their confidence and recognizing their successes. Because most firm leaders are still men, it is essential to actively engage men in this effort.

Firms also must make systemic changes that will increase objectivity in access to opportunities. Regularly review and evaluate firm policies, access to mentoring and sponsorship, work assignment systems and evaluation systems. And be intentional about planning for client succession. Building into these systems greater transparency and objective review will allow women to develop their skills and provide access to the opportunities necessary to have an established and thriving practice.

Q: Outside your firm, name an attorney you admire and tell us why.

A: I have always admired Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. As the first woman appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court, she was a trailblazer and role model for many women entering law when I did. She faced many obstacles and rejections throughout her career, yet she never gave up. As a result, her path to the Supreme Court was not "typical" — she followed her husband in his military career, started her own law practice when other firms wouldn't hire her, took time out to raise her family, served in government and was then elected as a state judge in Arizona. When she was appointed to the Supreme Court, many criticized her qualifications and raised questions about her suitability for the court. Her ultimate success on the court, as well as her lifelong dedication to her family, is such a great inspiration for those of us who don't fit the "typical" mold.

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