

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Faegre Baker's Maureen Maly

Law360, New York (January 08, 2014, 11:47 AM ET) -- Maureen Maly is a partner in Faegre Baker Daniels LLP's Minneapolis office, and leads the firm's Employee Retirement Income Security Act, benefits and executive compensation group. Her practice focuses on employee benefits, with a particular expertise in health and welfare benefits issues, including health care reform, consumer-driven health plans such as HRAs and HSAs, cafeteria plan rules, wellness, COBRA, retiree medical, administrative contracts, and other health plan issues. She regularly helps companies design cost-effective health and welfare programs, while minimizing legal risks and administrative complications. She leads the welfare benefits team that services many large, Fortune 500 clients. She is also the editor of and a frequent contributor to the Faegre Baker Daniels health care reform blog.

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

A: I found a niche expertise in employee benefits law, which allowed me to differentiate myself as an expert and remove the focus from gender. For me, having a unique specialization has allowed me to be a part of many client teams to which I might not have otherwise had access. I have also sought out opportunities for leadership within the firm. A few years ago, I felt a bit disengaged and thought about leaving the firm. Instead, I decided first to ask the firm for what I needed, including more opportunities for leadership and engagement in firm life. I am pleased to say the firm has been extremely supportive. Sometimes all you need to do is ask.

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

A: The time commitment is challenging. I have a busy, thriving practice that requires a lot of attention. At the same time, I could spend endless hours on group management and development, because the opportunities we have are so exciting. But, I also have a very busy family. My husband also has a demanding career and our two active teenagers are very involved in sports and music. It is really important to me that I strike a balance between home and work. If you have this balance as a core value, it makes decisions about how to spend your time much easier. I am lucky to have an extremely supportive husband who is a true partner on the home front. I could not do this job without him.

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

A: I have been fortunate not to experience much sexism in my career. As a senior associate, I had a project with a male senior partner and one of his clients, who was also an older man. When the senior partner introduced me, the client said he was glad that our group had "pulchritude." He probably thought he was being clever and could get away with making a sexist remark by using a little-known word. At the time, all of us reacted a bit uncomfortably but moved on with the legal project.

Later, I looked up the word and discovered that it meant "physical beauty and appeal," which of course was a completely inappropriate comment. The senior partner apologized and spoke to the client, and the client was never inappropriate again. The partner also offered me the option of not working with the client any more, but I felt that would have been accepting a defeat. While the client's comment was inappropriate, I was happy for the chance to show that I brought much more than "beauty" to the project.

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

A: In the initial years of practice, I tell any attorney to concentrate on learning your craft really well and establishing relationships with partners in your practice group and with peers at the firm. Beyond these initial years, though, being a good lawyer is no longer enough to succeed at a large law firm. It is important to start thinking like an owner — what is your practice going to be, who will you work with, and how will you keep yourself busy?

Sometimes women, in particular, feel uncomfortable about the marketing aspects of practice. I have found it helpful to think of marketing my practice and services as less of a "sales job," and more in terms of how I can help a client solve a problem. There is no "one size fits all" style for marketing. For some people, marketing means cultivating deep relationships by getting to know people through community organizations, board service, and at clients. Others feel more comfortable writing and speaking widely in their area of expertise. The key is to find a style that feels right to you, where you can be yourself and develop rewarding relationships. Finding a mentor or sponsor (male or female) who can help you work through this process throughout your career can also be extremely helpful.

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

A: It is very important to have a culture that views diversity as a core value guiding decisions. Lots of firms say they value diversity as a core value, but few actually succeed at putting this into action, intentionally providing leadership opportunities to women to lead important client relationships and to take on firm management roles.

It is also extremely important to provide flexible work options, not just for women, but for all personnel — and not just part-time, but also programs like full-time, flex time. One of the best things about modern technology is that we can work from anywhere at any time, and firms supporting this style of work will attract more diverse candidates.

Finally, women who have children face many transition points in their career, such as coming on and off from maternity leave. It is essential that firms support women through these transitions, recognizing that these issues are difficult, that it's normal and acceptable for the woman to feel pulled in many directions, and that they are valued at work. For example, when women return from maternity leave, they need great opportunities to work on engaging projects to help them remember what they love about work. Women have great choices and opportunities in today's world and firms need to work harder than ever to convince them that working at a firm is the best option.

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

A: I have great admiration for Lisa Van Fleet, who leads the employee benefits group at Bryan Cave LLP. I

started my benefits practice at Bryan Cave LLP in 1993 when Lisa was a new partner. She was a great mentor to me, and a good example of a successful woman who “had it all” — both a thriving practice and a rewarding family life, with (at the time) young children.

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