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Nothing ventured, nothing gained: The importance of risk taking

After 23 years of practice, including 11 years at the firm where I imagined I would stay for the rest of my career, I was presented with an intriguing opportunity. Would I be interested in building a labor and employment group for a midsize law firm opening a branch in Chicago?

I would have the freedom — and the responsibility — of recruiting talent, creating a thriving team and bringing in the business that would make our group in Chicago a success.

Some lawyers might have reflexively said no to an offer like this. Why leave a perceived sure thing behind to strike out into the unknown? Midcareer is a time when many lawyers have overcome the hurdles of the earlier years and settled into a productive flow.

Responsibilities on the home front, meanwhile, have become more complex and it is understandable that many lawyers, and women lawyers in particular, would decide that now is not the time to take a risk.

But I said yes. That is because my career has given me a front-row seat to why it is so important for female lawyers to take strategic risks, both for the good of their own careers, and for the good of the legal profession.

See the bigger picture

I was fortunate to have the opportunity earlier in my career to serve as president of the Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law; it made a tremendous impact on my outlook. By creating avenues for female lawyers to connect, both within and across firms and in-house legal departments, as well as across generations, the coalition provided opportunities for me to learn from my colleagues. I came to understand three things:

First, the legal profession is full

of incredibly intelligent, ambitious, skilled and experienced lawyers.

Second, many outstanding female lawyers shy away from seizing big opportunities. Whether it is fear of failure or lack of confidence in their skills and preparedness, I have seen these women choose the safe option instead of going after opportunities that men would seize in a heartbeat.

Third and most important, I have seen the women who decide to take the leap — whether that is changing firms, as I did, advocating for promotion to general counsel or making another bold step forward — succeed and thrive beyond anything they could have imagined.

Build resilience and put failure in its place

Of course, we all have to assess the complete landscape of our lives before we decide to charge ahead with a change or new project. The demands of life outside work ebb and flow, and there are times when the prudent course is the status quo.

But if you make an honest accounting of your true reasons for choosing the safe path and find your own fears are actually the

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thing holding you back, consider what this means. When women assess risk, they tend to count the ways they might fall short of the new goal. But they often fail to consider the alternative: the risk of not taking a risk.

What are you giving up in terms of increased compensation, broader experience and higher-

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profile work by keeping to the safe path?

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Time and time again, I have seen female lawyers get mired down in perceived failures and stall out just as their work was about to make a big leap forward. That is why it is so important to develop a process for assessing what is not working, debriefing to figure out lessons learned, and then, most importantly, moving on.

group from the ground up in Chicago. I would not have to work around people who had been brought in under previous leadership that may have been guided by different values.

For the first time in my career, I could truly execute my own vision for the team. But I also knew a great team would not come together on its own. The responsibility would rest with me in large part.

First, I had to articulate clearly for myself the goals I had for the practice group as well as the values that would dictate how we went about serving our clients. Those goals and values guided my process for selecting the team members and bringing each lawyer's unique skill set into harmony with the other members of the team.

All in all, it was a tremendous amount of responsibility, and that made it feel risky. But had I stopped short of making the leap out of fear, I would have lost out on the chance to make a real and lasting impact on how work gets done in my field.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained — not for my own career, and not for the clients my team would be able to help in new and exciting ways.

As I look back over my career, I realize how important it was for me to see women in leadership positions who had overcome barriers and forged new paths. They were my role models. At some point in every woman's career, the torch is passed, and we begin to look not just to those who came before us, but to the women coming up now.

We really do have the power to shape our careers, and when we take bold risks, the gains extend beyond our own careers and help to show other women lawyers what is possible if they have faith in their skills and take the leap.