

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Benesch's Megan Mehalko



Law360, New York (June 02, 2014, 1:34 PM ET) -- Megan L. Mehalko is a partner in the Cleveland office of Benesch Friedlander Coplan & Aronoff LLP, where she chairs the firm's corporate and securities practice group. She serves on the executive committee, the finance committee and the professional development committee. Her practice focuses on M&A, corporate governance, and securities matters. She serves as outside general counsel to a number of public and private companies and regularly counsels boards of directors on fiduciary duties and other matters. Mehalko is actively involved on the boards of College Now Greater Cleveland, Seeds of Literacy and on the Laurel School Alumnae Board. She has

also been chairwoman of the corporate leadership team for the American Heart Association's Go Red for Women campaign.

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

A: Hard work and excellent client service are fundamental to success in any environment. However, my determination to be a leader and joining a law firm that encouraged me to be involved in management certainly contributed to my success. When I first started practicing, I was focused on being a business lawyer. A senior lawyer approached me and suggested that perhaps I would be better suited to work in estate planning and administration because widows would be comfortable with me. I think that may have made me even more determined to succeed as a business lawyer and get into the boardroom!

Perhaps, most importantly, I have been blessed to really love what I do — the people I work with as colleagues and as clients and the challenges we face every day. I believe those who are passionate about their careers will succeed.

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

A: We juggle a lot with work, community and family obligations. Doing that without drawing negative attention (or appearing too busy) is really hard. I always felt that if my partners knew how many directions I was going in, they would say "maybe you shouldn't take on this management challenge right

now.” I projected calm confidence in my ability to get things done and be focused and engaged while at the same time I knew I would be up at 3 a.m. making brownies for the bake sale. Right or wrong, I think we have to work harder to earn credibility. And we have to balance being perceived as strong versus being perceived as “aggressive.”

There are some things that we do because we are women, that I feel like I may have an advantage. For example, I think most women are great communicators, and we definitely can multitask.

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

A: I never focused on being a woman lawyer — just a great lawyer. But, two instances come to mind where the fact that I was a woman impacted others’ perceptions.

When I was a young associate, I was helping a senior partner close a transaction. I was getting documents signed by one of the officers of the company — he was about 35-40 years old. He asked me how long I had been the senior partner’s secretary! I was sort of puzzled at first and then I realized he really meant it. Knowing he was an important client, I didn’t want to embarrass him, so I simply responded that I had worked for the law firm for a few years.

Late that day, I received a phone call from this same client. He was calling from his plane — this was before cellphones were common and he was using one of those phones they had in the head rest of the plane — and he was mortified. He had learned that I was an attorney and he apologized profusely. He was very embarrassed and told me that he learned a very important lesson. He was shocked that at his age he could have made that assumption and he had daughters and he was so happy that he would now better understand the challenges they might face in their careers. He became a very good client and we worked together for almost 10 years before we sold his company.

Another time, I was in Dallas for a client’s board meeting. As usual, we all went to dinner — the board and several management representatives. Maybe 20 of us total. We all talked and joked through dinner. As we approached dessert, a couple of the waiters came up to me and said they just wanted me to know how impressed they were by me. I had no idea what they were talking about and one of them said, “But you are the only woman in this room!” I looked around and realized that was true — but I hadn’t even noticed.

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

A: Of course, work hard, get great experience and have fun — and fun is important! Take a long-term view of your career — I often said that some weeks I was a great mother that struggled to balance work and some weeks I was a great lawyer that struggled to balance family. Over the course of time, they balance each other out and I think I am great at both!

Focus on business development — learn how to develop and maintain client relationships. I recognized early in my career that developing my own clients allowed me greater control over my career.

Ask for what you want. Women generally believe that if they perform well it will be recognized and rewarded. That is not always the case. We need to be better at speaking up to ask for what we want — whether it is more compensation (if earned) or the high-profile deal for an important client or an important management position within the firm (if we are qualified to handle it.)

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

A: Be flexible. Allow for alternative work schedules or job sharing. Some practices are very conducive to that kind of flexibility while others are not. Give credit to women attorneys for participation as team members in client development and retention. Provide business development training and resources directed at women attorneys. Put women in important management positions in the firm.

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

A: Sandra Day O'Connor, Margaret Thatcher and every other woman attorney who was a first in her high-profile, influential position. These amazing women made it easier for the rest of us to be viewed as equals in the world of the law.

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