

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Axelrod Firm's Sheryl Axelrod



Law360, New York (April 28, 2014, 1:36 PM ET) -- Sheryl L. Axelrod is president of The Axelrod Firm PC in Philadelphia. She represents national and global entities in their general and product liability, employment, commercial and appellate litigation matters.

She serves as a Diversity Fellow in the American Bar Association, and as a member of the Diversity Committee of the National Association of Women Lawyers. She has also been appointed by two chancellors of the Philadelphia Bar Association to membership on the Investigative Division of the Commission on Judicial Selection and Retention, where she led teams vetting the individuals seeking to be

elected judges in Pennsylvania.

She co-chairs the Advocacy Committee of NAMWOLF, the National Association of Minority and Women Owned Law Firms.

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

A: By establishing myself as a brief writer. In that arena, I obtained near total autonomy. I could map my briefs out and write them as I saw fit, and I'm talking even in nine-figure cases.

However, if I had stayed in the old boys' network, I would never have gotten known for my trial work or built a client base. I didn't know I could own a courtroom and grow clients until I launched my own firm and did so.

I got where I am largely by carving out a path outside of the old boys' network, by founding my own firm. Over the course of my career, I built a ton of professional relationships, people who were aware of my skills. From those relationships, I strategically developed a book of business. Suddenly I was advising clients, putting myself in courtrooms, exercising my skills, and demonstrating my worth.

When clients began coming to me for issues unrelated to our initial engagement, when they started thinking of me as their trusted advisor on all legal matters, when they started multiplying their business

with me, I knew they would recommend me to other companies. I've been growing my client base ever since.

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

A: Women have it harder on a number of fronts. Law firms don't evaluate or pay us equally, credit us for the work we bring in equally, or promote us into senior leadership positions equally.

Because of this, law firms are at great risk of discrimination claims. Just as law firm employment attorneys advise their client-companies to audit pay and promotions to guard against discrimination cases, so should law firms audit the pay and promotions of their lawyers by gender and minority status.

Law firms need to get representative numbers of women and minorities on compensation committees and in leadership.

Firms also need to address unconscious bias. Our client-companies are way ahead of most law firms, putting programs into place to raise awareness about unconscious bias and combat it.

Firms also need to show women and all lawyers flexibility.

Women and minorities are leaving big law in droves as a result of firms' disparate treatment of them. It's mind-boggling, as the amount of money to be made by firms that turn the corner, include them and retain them is staggering.

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

A: I have countless times. Ask any woman whether she made a suggestion in a group setting that a man then made and was told was great. She probably has. I respond by saying something like, "It's neat to hear you all liked my suggestion — thanks!"

If a woman or minority shares a great idea in a group, I'll echo it. I'll say, "Sue, that was a great idea!" Then I'll repeat her idea (complete the echo), because in all likelihood, it wasn't heard. It tends to help the idea get heard and well received.

In general when it comes to sexist remarks, I figure no one wants to be sexist. It's a question of raising awareness so when someone says or does something sexist, I try to make them aware of it.

I publish articles and speak publicly about unconscious bias and the profitability of diversity for similar reasons — to try to raise awareness.

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

A: Do everything they say — work hard, study the rules, etc. — but get out there and build relationships.

You will become successful in proportion to the amount of people who care about you, think highly of you, believe in you, and want to see you succeed, so don't eat your lunch behind your desk. Take time to sit down and talk with other people. Invest in building relationships.

Be strategic. Think about business development from the beginning of your career, and come up with a plan to attract clients that fits your personality.

Think about launching a firm. Many women found firms as a last resort. Instead, consider planning for it. Owning a firm can be a great option.

If you really want to go far, have a vision, clearly define it, and pursue it. Law firms generally do a terrible job of defining their vision. Being the best, most reputable, the brightest, etc. isn't a vision. When have you achieved that vision? How far are your competitors from reaching it? Come up with a vision that distinguishes who you are (brand yourself) and make that vision concrete.

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

A: Make the goal of increasing the number of women partners a strategic firm initiative. As I discuss in my article on diversity as a competitive financial advantage, firms that better include women and minorities stand to multiply their profits.

Start by getting a representative number of women on the compensation committee and in leadership positions. If 30 percent of your attorneys are women, 30 percent of your compensation committee members and other leaders should be.

Implement a comprehensive program to identify and minimize bias. Audit hiring, pay, evaluations and promotions for gender and minority-based discrepancies. Check how assignments, networking opportunities and client development resources are distributed along gender and minority lines among firm attorneys. Institute flexible working arrangements.

Also, make people take ownership of the initiative. Make partners pay in real dollars for the women and minorities under them who leave, and consider rewarding partners who better retain them.

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

A: Mary Ann Mullaney. Mary is an exceptionally talented trial lawyer at Blank Rome, one of the 100 largest law firms in the country and the place where I used to work. Mary is committed to putting systems in place to help women and minorities achieve equality. Although she is busy with a thriving practice, she takes time to mentor and develop other women. She views everyone as an equal, and is the most strategic and innovative thinker I know. She reads volumes about diversity, inclusion and equality and why firms fail, and uses her knowledge to raise awareness and make the profession better.

It was her idea to create the Fearless Women Network, the nonprofit we founded dedicated to shattering glass ceilings and obliterating unequal pay. We put on our first event on April 24, 2014, a symposium on the pay gap in the legal profession, the monies by which women and minorities are shortchanged. We had a wonderful lineup of speakers and sponsors, and all 110 seats for guests were taken!

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