



GRIT

The Secret to Advancement

STORIES OF SUCCESSFUL WOMEN LAWYERS

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Although I am pleased to offer my insight and advice, I would begin by suggesting that there is no fail-safe or must-do method for achieving success in the practice of law. Furthermore, I think that success should be broadly defined as a career that one can look back on with pride and satisfaction. Success is too often measured in economic terms or with reference to other factors that do not necessarily show that one's work was truly fulfilling or beneficial in a larger sense.

I've worked in a variety of law firm environments. I started private practice in a firm with only five attorneys—all partners, and all men—and I worked there on an hourly basis. It was a high-quality, boutique practice, and I had the privilege to be particularly guided by the most senior partner. He was very understanding of the predicament of younger professional women, despite his age, because he had two daughters with very active professional careers who also had young children. This was not the first time that I got encouragement from men who had daughters pursuing professional careers.

I then went into a slightly larger, but still relatively focused, practice that grew to as many as 20 attorneys and which, at its best, was a very happy place to work. That was the first firm where the male attorneys made an active effort to include the female attorneys as colleagues in a general sense. And it was very helpful to have other female attorneys working with me for the first time in my career. The women I have had the privilege of working with have been a great source of support and strength for me, and some of them have been particularly invaluable in helping me through the invariable rough spots that present themselves both professionally and personally.

I ultimately left that practice, though, to go into one of my state's largest firms, and one that had a deserved reputation for being one of the better large firms in which to work. By sheer serendipity—and serendipity turns out to be a bigger factor than some might admit—I began my tenure there with a young male

partner with whom I built a very nice practice. We were similarly minded in terms of how we grew the practice, serviced our clients, and treated the people who worked with us in our practice, whom we both viewed as essential to our ultimate success.

The time came, though, when it made more sense for us to take our practice elsewhere with some of our other colleagues at that firm, and so we only recently started a new firm. That was probably the biggest professional challenge I had ever confronted. It gave me great admiration for attorneys who also have to function as business people. It's also given me an opportunity to be a more vocal participant in policy-making that could help the interests of women.

If I could offer some observations, although I'm reluctant to call this advice, to other women in the profession, let me say that it's vitally important, if you have a family, to have the strong support of your spouse and children as your career evolves. I'm not sure that happy personal and professional lives can exist without it.

You will also see things that occur, sometimes very subtly, within your firms and the profession generally, that still are not completely fair to women in the profession—or to men in the profession who want to be actively involved in the day-to-day care of their children. In retrospect, I think there were times when I should have agitated about these concerns sooner than I did. And although agitation needs to be done carefully, if an egregious situation presents itself and it's only right that it be rectified, you will feel some satisfaction at the end of the day to know that you made your voice heard.

Be mindful of the fact that support and opportunities can come from anywhere. Sometimes it's just a more senior attorney who is willing to discuss a problem and has weathered a similar experience as a younger attorney. Or maybe it's an older attorney who would like some quality help from a junior attorney, and who would be more than happy to mentor that person if he or she had confidence in the quality of the work and the dedication of the younger person to serving the clients.

Take on challenges gladly—for example, handling the difficult client matter or mastering a niche area that no one else is interested in but that could be helpful to your clients and colleagues. This will help build your confidence, and it will also help your clients and colleagues feel confident in you. In all events, you will need to work hard, on a sustained basis, to do as good a job as you can to serve clients well, so that you can be satisfied with yourself and the small part you played within the legal system to make life better for others.

And remember, sometimes this journey may seem like a struggle, but your steadfast pursuit will serve you, your clients, and the advancement of the profession—including the women of the profession—well.

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