

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Goodwin Procter's Joanne Gray

Law360, New York (January 29, 2014, 1:12 PM ET) -- Joanne Gray is a partner in Goodwin Procter LLP's New York office, and chair of its specialty litigation group and products liability and mass torts practice. She defends matters involving high-profile products liability, class actions, consumer fraud and mass tort claims. She also provides litigation avoidance counseling, including advising on related regulatory compliance and consumer product labeling issues. Gray also serves as co-chairwoman of the firm's food industry group, and counsels clients and provides labeling, risk management and strategic advice to a wide range of food and supplement businesses, including in the fast-growing and rapidly changing healthy living section of the industry.

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

A: When I got out of law school there were few female lawyers who had risen to national prominence or were in senior leadership positions in law firms, and discrimination against women was far more common — and more overt — than it is today. My way of dealing with it was to push back when appropriate and to work to change the status quo. Hard work and ignoring any “excess noise” allows you to focus on what is truly important in the legal profession: representing your clients well, doing what is morally right when barriers need to be broken down, and opening the doors for the women behind you.

As a young lawyer, I also built my own network of female attorneys and we still keep in touch. That network has provided all of us with support, advice and even client introductions, as we know that the women of our era had to work twice as hard to get the same recognition. Working together over the years has fostered a trust among us, based on mutual respect.

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

A: When you are a firm leader with an active legal practice there are many pulls on your time. Multiple surveys have shown that women are very good at time management, but they tend to say “yes” to additional projects even when they are overburdened and they should be saying “no.” You need to set priorities and be able to delegate to those you trust, and you have to learn how to say no when it is appropriate to do so. You also need to show that you can lead and build consensus in tough economic times, while maintaining morale and focusing on long-term goals.

I think that women lawyers are sometimes still judged more harshly when they are “strong leaders,” as some may see that behavior in a woman as being too forceful, while men who are “strong leaders” are often respected. It is not fair when that unequal treatment occurs and we all need to work to be sure that both male and female leaders are judged using the same standards. On the good side, women

leaders often score high on consensus-building and since law firm partnerships are rather flat business structures, consensus-building skills are critical to success as a law firm leader. We only serve as long as we have the support of our partners.

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

A: I was a young lawyer who was part of a team in a long and hotly contested hearing in New York state court. All the other members of both teams were men, and all of them — including the judge — were much older than me. As I approached the podium to speak for the first time, the judge called me “sweetie.” As in “it’s your turn to argue, sweetie!” The whole courtroom froze and just waited for my reply. I nicely informed him that “there is only one person in my life who is allowed to call me sweetie, and unfortunately he isn’t present in the courtroom right now!” The judge laughed and turned a bit red, and said “OK, please start.” He didn’t apologize, but I thought that I had made my point.

I later spoke to the only other women in the courtroom at the time, the court reporter, who told me that the judge said that to every young woman lawyer who came before him and most of them just ignored it, as they were too frightened to take the judge on in open court. Luckily, I have never really been driven by fear so I didn’t think twice about my response. I was before that judge several more times in that case, and he never called me sweetie again.

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

A: Work hard and know where you want to be in your career in 10 years. Do you want to be a partner in a large law firm? A law professor? A judge? An in-house counsel? Something else? The choices you make early on can pave the way to different career options in the law, so always be focused on the future and on your ultimate, long-term goals.

Also, young female lawyers now have many successful female roles model in the legal profession. Seek them out and ask them for advice. Many of them are eager to see young women advance in the legal profession and would be happy that you reached out to them. Finally, find yourself a good mentor or two, male or female. Pick someone you trust who will give you honest advice and will help you advance your long term career goals.

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

A: Every partner and counsel in the firm needs to be focused on training and advancing the next generation of lawyers, and making sure that every lawyer has an equal opportunity to be successful. You need to identify where you have issues that may be contributing to attrition, which is an important first step in keeping highly qualified lawyers in the pipeline. I am a fan of having more flexible routes to partnership — for both men and women — allowing a firm to promote the next generation of lawyers when they are ready. I also think that law firms need to have supportive, family-friendly maternity/paternity and other leave and flex-time policies.

Examine your data and see where and when you are losing your most talented lawyers — including your women partner candidates. If you measure the satisfaction level of your associates through anonymous surveys like Survey Monkey, you can identify the areas where you need to improve and focus on the specific issues where you can move the needle. Mentoring and women’s initiative programs have also been highly successful at many law firms.

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

A: Oh, there are so many — I will name just a few. Sara Gourley of Sidley, for working to break the glass ceiling and for introducing me to the phrase “there’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help other women.” Mary Yelenick of Chadbourne, for her leadership in pro bono and social justice work, particularly for reminding all of us that we have a duty to assist those less fortunate than us. And Jessie Zeigler of Bass Berry, for her transformational leadership of several American Bar Association groups that have worked to increase inclusion in the legal profession.

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