

Empowering Women's Legal Careers: Mastering the Art of Rainmaking

By Tasha Dickinson

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The underrepresentation of women in the legal profession remains a persistent issue despite significant strides toward gender equality. The historic appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1981 marked a pivotal moment, breaking centuries-old gender barriers within the highest echelons of legal jurisprudence. Yet, this milestone, while monumental, underscores the recent nature of women's integration into top legal positions, including those of women of color, whose representation remains even more scarce.

In the landscape of law firms, the disparity is stark. According to a McKinsey & Co. report titled "Women in Law Firms," women hold merely 26% of seats on law firm boards of directors. The gender gap widens at the leadership level, with men outnumbering women nearly 3 to 1 on these boards, and women of color representing a mere 4% of these positions.

Reflecting on the progress during Women's History Month prompts a forward-looking perspective on how women in law can transcend these statistics. The journey toward equity in partnership and board representation at law firms may well begin with mastering the art of becoming a rainmaker. Building a strong book of business is crucial, and while there is no uniform strategy that fits all, here are some tips for aspiring female attorneys.

Pick the Right Law Firm

In the legal profession, systemic barriers often make it challenging for women to achieve the status of rainmakers. I am privileged to be part of Day Pitney, a firm that actively supports the advancement

of women within the legal sector. Our firm is distinguished by its significant number of women in leadership roles, including several who are among the top rainmakers. For female attorneys navigating compensation and partnership structures within law firms, transparency and equitable policies are crucial. I recommend joining firms with transparent compensation systems, where salary and bonus structures are openly shared. This transparency is essential for assessing fairness in pay, particularly in environments where such details are typically opaque. Furthermore, it is important to understand the firm's partnership model, which often includes both income and equity tiers. Evaluating the representation of women, especially in equity partnership roles, can provide insight into the firm's commitment to gender equity.



Tasha K. Dickinson of Day Pitney

Courtesy photo

During job interviews, it is important to inquire about the pathway to equity partnership and clarify the firm's policies on maternity leave and part-time work arrangements. For instance, at Day Pitney, the journey to partnership is not limited to full-time attorneys. Some attorneys may be part-time due to family responsibilities, but that does not impede their pathway to partnership.

Networking and Relationship Building

Networking and relationship building are as crucial to your career as the legal matters you work on. The process of building your client base is a long-term endeavor, and I strongly advocate beginning as early as possible. The relationships forged in your twenties and thirties are likely to evolve into valuable business sources throughout your career. This journey requires patience and persistence; imagine it as slowly pushing a snowball uphill. Initially, the effort seems immense with little movement, but once you reach the summit, and with one gentle nudge, it gathers momentum on its own. The early stages are the most demanding, yet they lay the groundwork for future success. Immediate results in networking may not always be visible, so it is crucial not to be disheartened by the slow start.

For younger attorneys, it is more effective to connect with individuals who share mutual interests rather than distributing your business card indiscriminately. Genuine connections, fostered by shared passions, lead to meaningful relationships. People are more inclined to collaborate with someone they genuinely appreciate.

Furthermore, it is beneficial for women to leverage their unique approach to networking, which often emphasizes the creation of deep, trust-based relationships. This natural inclination towards meaningful engagement can be a significant advantage in building a robust professional network.

Seeking Mentors

Selecting the right mentors is crucial for professional development, especially for women in law.

It is beneficial to seek guidance from both male and female mentors who can provide diverse perspectives and support. Given the scarcity of female role models in senior positions within some firms, joining organizations dedicated to the advancement of women in law, such as the Florida Association for Women Lawyers (FAWL), can be incredibly valuable. During my tenure as FAWL president (2009-2010), I focused on facilitating the path for those following in my footsteps by initiating a mentorship program that was later implemented statewide. This program aimed to equip young attorneys with the tools for success through insights from more experienced practitioners.

At Day Pitney, my role as a mentor involves accompanying junior colleagues to networking events, introducing them to key contacts, and integrating them into meaningful conversations. Such efforts not only contribute to their professional growth but also enhance their network. The principle of paying it forward is powerful; the individuals you support today may become significant sources of business in the future as they advance in their careers.

The legacy of trailblazers like Sandra Day O'Connor has illuminated the path for women navigating the legal landscape. While women are making great strides in the legal profession, transforming the profession to one that fully embraces and celebrates the contributions of women is now up to you. Mastering the art of rainmaking is a step in the right direction and part of the solution toward gender equity.

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