

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Sugarman Rogers' Chris Netski



Law360, New York (June 02, 2014, 1:34 PM ET) -- Christine Netski is a partner at Sugarman Rogers Barshak & Cohen PC in Boston, and serves as co-chairwoman of the firm's business litigation group. She concentrates her practice in business and employment litigation, and regularly counsels corporate clients in matters involving noncompetition and nonsolicitation agreements, misappropriation of trade secrets, shareholder disputes, breach of fiduciary duty, fraud, misrepresentation, civil conspiracy, defamation, commercial disparagement, unfair trade practices, bad faith insurance practices, public accommodations, consumer class actions and breach of contract.

Netski serves as a member of the Boston Bar Association's executive committee and council, vice president of the board of directors of the Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, and a recent co-chairwoman of the Women's Leadership Initiative for the Women's Bar Association. She was recently named one of the "Top Women of Law" by Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly and is a fellow of the Litigation Counsel of America.

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

A: When I embarked on a career in the law, I didn't view my gender as a barrier to success — at least consciously. I was fortunate to be raised by parents who taught me that I could excel in any profession if I worked hard and found fulfillment in my work. This somewhat naive attitude helped me to focus on doing excellent work and building meaningful professional relationships without worrying too much about how I might become one of the guys. I was also extremely lucky to find a law firm where women have enjoyed great success, where I have had wonderful mentors and where my contributions have been valued.

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

A: I think the greatest challenge for senior attorneys is much the same for women and men — finding enough hours in the day to effectively juggle client service, business development, firm management,

mentoring and public service activities. The real challenge for the profession is that far too few women are becoming equity partners in law firms and younger female attorneys have far fewer role models and mentors than their male counterparts.

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

A: I am pleased to say that I have rarely encountered overt sexism during my career. I do recall one occasion when I was an associate and a male partner commented in front of a large group of attorneys in the firm lunch room that I looked like I was carrying a basketball in my stomach (I was nine months pregnant). I asked him what his excuse was (he was quite round in the belly as well), and everyone had a good laugh. Unfortunately, I think sexism most often comes in the form of unconscious bias, which is much more difficult to ferret out and address.

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

A: When I mentor younger female attorneys, I advise them to continuously build their skills and to always do excellent work. I advise them to take ownership of their careers and to seek out opportunities for growth, even when those opportunities seem daunting. I remind them that we all have to get through our “first” experiences doing what real lawyers do and that it is important to take advantage of opportunities for increased responsibility early and often. I caution them not to get “stuck” in a supportive role on cases because it feels comfortable and to insist on opportunities to be the “lead.”

I encourage them to seek out mentors inside their firms who are genuinely invested in their success and will give them opportunities to develop business. I also advise them to pursue mentoring relationships outside the firm and to be proactive in managing those relationships. I encourage them to become involved in bar activities and, in doing so, to select projects or committees in which they have a genuine interest, are enthusiastic about committing their time and energy and can ultimately assume a leadership role.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I advise them to start building their networks early, beginning with their law school and college classmates.

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

A: In addition to offering part-time and flexible work schedules, firms must be proactive in ensuring that female associates are given the same opportunities for growth as male associates, especially in terms of client contact and business development. It is too often the case that women who work part-time are not considered for certain projects based upon inaccurate assumptions about their availability or their willingness to do a particular type of work. If female associates are engaged by their work, are given leadership opportunities in their firms and are successful in generating business, they are not likely to “opt out.”

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

A: I have had the opportunity to work with many good lawyers over the course of my career, but Dan Goldstein epitomizes my ideal of a truly great lawyer. Dan is a founding partner of Brown Goldstein Levy in Baltimore and has enjoyed a distinguished career as a trial lawyer. As counsel for the National Federation of the Blind for more than two decades, Dan has spearheaded a national effort to ensure that blind individuals have access to technology, including websites, ATMs and voting machines, and is now focusing his efforts on ensuring equal access to digital information, especially instructional materials used in education.

In addition to being a great trial lawyer, Dan brings unsurpassed passion, creativity and pragmatism to his disability rights work. Dan utilizes every opportunity to raise public awareness of the importance of access to technology to individuals with disabilities and has been extraordinarily successful in encouraging companies to improve access to their products and services, often without the necessity of litigation. It has been a great honor assisting Dan with the NFB's work in Massachusetts — he is the master of effective advocacy.

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