
Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Saul Ewing's Debbie Spranger

Law360, New York (April 08, 2014, 1:16 PM ET) -- Deborah Spranger is a vice chair of Saul Ewing LLP's business and finance department, a co-chair of its life sciences practice group and a member of the firm's seven-member executive committee. She focuses her practice on mergers and acquisitions, equity financings, licensing and general business transactions for life sciences and other manufacturing and technology companies.

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

A: I don't define myself in terms of my gender. My clients and colleagues are more likely to point out that I am the only woman in the room than I am to notice it myself. In the context of my work, it is simply not relevant. That being said, I do think I have been given more opportunities because I am a woman in a male-dominated practice area. And, Saul Ewing has actively sought to put more women in positions of influence.

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

A: I think people tend to perceive women as being younger than they really are. Youth is equated with inexperience and naivete. So, I often find myself in the ironic position of trying to convince my colleagues that I'm really not that young anymore! It can also be a challenge to take a strong position without being perceived as being bitchy or difficult.

I have been fortunate in that most of the men at the firm have been open to working with me. I try not to approach people in terms of "managing" them or telling them what to do. I want to talk with people and get their thoughts on how things are going and directions they should be heading. Figuring out what motivates people and then working with them to maximize the value they are bringing to and deriving from their work is what I enjoy most about my job.

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

A: In my experience, overt sexism is relatively rare. There was the time when a senior partner refused to work with me after I went part-time because he didn't have any "part-time clients" (footnote: I continued to be exceedingly responsive to him and his "full-time" clients such that he came around and eventually apologized). There was a Southern businessman on the other side of a transaction who insisted on calling me "honey" and "sweetheart" throughout our dealings (to the great horror of my client).

Covert sexism is much more prevalent, and frankly more damaging.

It's the partner who assumes that every time I leave the office I'm going home or taking a sick kid to the doctor, rather than the truth — which is that I'm usually running for a meeting or a business development event. It's the colleague who complains that I can get a new client just by "flipping my hair." It's even the double standard that persists between women taking maternity leave (which is generally accepted these days) and men taking paternity leave (which is not).

How do I handle it? Most of the time, I address it head-on — calmly and firmly. When my partner tells me to have a good night as I run out the door at 4:30, I say, "I'll see you when I return from my client meeting." I laugh at the hair-flipping comment, and then tell my colleague that he's just jealous (it would help if he were balding, but no such luck). And, I encourage my male colleagues to take the firm's allotted paternity leave — and ask my partners to do the same. I don't take offense, and I don't make more of it than is intended. But, I also do not ignore it.

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

A: Don't try to be something you're not! Be yourself. You are good enough, smart enough, hard-working enough — enough, period. You don't need anyone to tell you that. I have spent way too much of my career seeking affirmation from clients and colleagues, while taking every negative comment to heart. The reality is that we're all busy. We're all thinking about our own clients, careers and families. The fact that your boss (male or female) didn't acknowledge the all-nighter you pulled to turn the latest draft of an acquisition agreement — or the great job that you did on it — doesn't mean that (s)he doesn't know or appreciate it, or you.

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

A: It's the flip side of my answer above. Women generally need more outside affirmation of their performance than men. We also have a tendency to be harder on ourselves, so the same comment may affect us more negatively than a male colleague. It doesn't mean they need to go easy on us, but just be aware.

Also, firm leaders — both formal and informal — need to be willing to admit that what we do is hard, and that everyone (even them) struggles at times. When we make it look or sound too easy, women who are struggling — whether to master a certain skill or build a book of business or balance their work with their lives — think there must be something wrong with them and opt out of the law firm, and sometimes the profession.

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

A: Jennifer Miller, general counsel at Renmatix. I've known Jenny since kindergarten. She had a substantial practice at a competing law firm, and gave it up to go in-house with a startup alternative energy company. Jenny is working harder than ever, but she is energized and enthusiastic and having a ball. I love my practice, but I admire her for taking a chance and rediscovering what she enjoyed about the practice of law.

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