



WOMEN IN BUSINESS LAW INITIATIVE

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Cracking the Glass Ceiling a Piece at a Time: A Primer

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INTRODUCTION

Last month, The Women in Business Law Initiative, hosted its fourth and final event,—a panel titled “Promotion and Advancement.” Rose Ors, Berkeley Law fellow and legal industry writer and columnist moderated the panel which included Wendy Devine, partner at Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati and Tana Ryan, partner at Kirkland and Ellis. They discussed the mindset, actions, habits, and approaches that helped them become equity partners at their respective firms. They also shared some of the setbacks they faced during their professional journey and how they learned from them and became stronger because of them. Their candor and no-nonsense advice was the inspiration for this report—a primer on some of the ways for you to ascend in your career. Every recommendation is based on research conducted by academics, professional organizations and non-profit organizations like Catalyst,¹ the American Bar Association,² McKinsey³ and LeanIn.⁴

As discussed in a number of our panels this year, gender parity in the legal profession continues to move at a glacial pace. Case in point, a 2019 report by the American Bar Association found that only 30% of Fortune 500 general counsels and less than 25% of partners in the 200 largest firms are women.”⁵ Our September 2019 report, “[Gender Parity in U.S. Law Firms](#)” included nine recommendations on what law firms can do to move closer to reaching gender parity.

There is no argument that gender inequality is a systemic issue. As such, it will take every player in the system to reverse it. It is the hope of the Women in Business Law Initiative that this primer will serve as a springboard for your professional goals, and by doing so continue to help create cracks in the glass ceiling for all.

Here’s to your success!

¹ Founded in 1992, Catalyst is a global nonprofit that through its collaborators, research, programs, and tools, help “accelerate progress for women at work.” <https://www.catalyst.org/what-we-do/>

² The mission of the ABA’s Commission on Women in the Profession is to “secure full and equal participation of women in the ABA, the profession and the justice system.” <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/diversity/women/>

³ McKinsey is one of the premier global consulting firms. <https://www.mckinsey.com/about-us/overview>

⁴ LeanIn, founded by Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, We help women achieve their ambitions and work to create an equal world. <https://leanin.org/about>

⁵ “A Current Glance at Women in the Law April 2019,” Commission on Women in the Profession, American Bar Association (2019), https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/women/current_glance_2019.pdf

No.1 ADVOCATE

Research shows that the quality of your work alone will not help you advance after you reach a certain seniority level—usually mid-career. Although important at every stage, at the mid-career point you need to actively advocate for yourself.

Self-advocacy is a learned skill that requires practice. It may be uncomfortable at first but it is a required component of career success. Here are some key actions:

- Establish mentor and sponsor relationships. Each play a unique and invaluable role. A quick way to remember the difference between each role is to think of a mentor as the person who speaks to you and a sponsor is the person who speaks about you.
- Ask for stretch assignments. Request to work on assignments that elevate your legal skills and increases your value to the organization. Stretch assignments also increases the opportunity to work on key clients teams or with influential members your organization.
- Seek feedback. Do not wait for your formal review. Instead, requesting feedback on your work and your contributions on a more regular basis will help you grow as an individual and as a lawyer. It will also send a message that you care. The feedback should be specific and actionable.
- Share your goals and aspirations with the individuals at work who are responsible for your career advancement. These individuals include, among others, your practice chair, mentor, and sponsor.
- Negotiate for what you need at work and at home. What you can negotiate at work will depend both on the culture of the organization and your seniority. That said, at any point in your career you should have the ability to negotiate things like your workload (you have too much work or want more challenging work) or the timing of your deliverables.

No.2 BELIEVE

Many of us—even the most accomplished among us—have experienced the “imposter syndrome.” In the Harvard Law Review article, “Overcoming Imposter Syndrome,”⁶ the author describes the condition as “as a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success.” At its core, the imposter syndrome is based on fear—fear of failure, fear of rejection.

If you identify with this feeling here are some ways to address your fear by reframing the critic in your mind:

- Take time to remember the times you felt like an imposter, went for it anyway, and succeeded. Believe you can do it again.
- Don’t suffer in silence. Talk to someone you trust to help you work through the impasse.
- Develop a narrative that mirrors reality. For example, if you attribute your success to “luck” remember that: “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.”⁷
- Accept that you will make mistakes and you will fail. Both are inevitable and happen whether you decide to move forward and grow or stand still and stagnate.
- Stop aspiring to be perfect—it’s a flawed construct. No one is perfect. Your goal is to do your best and continue to learn and grow.

⁶ Gill Corkindale, “Overcoming Imposter Syndrome,” Harvard Law Review (2008), <https://hbr.org/2008/05/overcoming-imposter-syndrome>

⁷ Seneca was a 1st century Roman Stoic philosopher, statesman, and dramatist.

No.3 COMMUNICATE

Your presence—how you speak, your body language, where you sit in a meeting—all communicate how you feel about yourself and will affect how you are perceived by others.

- Sharpen your written and oral communications. Always know who your audience is and respect their time and attention. Be sensitive to the tone of your communication—especially important in emails.
- Be the first to make eye contact and extend a warm and firm handshake in business meetings, conferences, and social gatherings. This will help you and others feel less nervous.
- Prepare for every conversation with the goal of contributing and connecting. Arrive early and mingle. Sit at the table, if possible, closest to the meeting lead or someone of influence. Follow-up after the meeting with new contacts by sending them an email or connecting on social media. These simple gestures will be appreciated and remembered.
- Learn the art of active listening. Make others feel seen, heard, and understood.
- Develop a clear, crisp and concise elevator pitch that explains not just what you do, but the value you add.

No.4 DELEGATE

Time makes us humble—it's the true equalizer. No matter how smart, organized, or efficient we are there are only a set numbers of hours to get things that matter done. There are two powerful ways to leverage the time you have: (1) say “no;” and (2) delegate.

Here are some ways to do each:

- List the top 25 things on your work and personal to-do list. Next decide the ones that only you can do. Then identify the one's not worth doing. What is left delegate.
- If you delegate, be clear about your expectations and then empower those who will be doing the work.
- Say “no” to career conferences, events or opportunities and invitations that do not meet your growth objectives. Say “yes” to opportunities that do meet the criteria or are simply fun.
- If you volunteer or are asked to lead an initiative, a team, or a client project ask for the support you need by making the business case on why the success of the project requires it.
- When your boss asks you to work on a new project, review your existing workload. If you have full workload and you aren't in a position to delegate, negotiate expectations like the timing of deliverables.

No.5 ENGAGE

Establishing and nurturing strong professional networks is vitally important to career fulfillment and advancement. It should be a priority at every stage in your career. Think of your network as the individuals who can offer you advice, feedback, support, resources, opportunities, connections, and, if you are in a law firm—business.

An effective network extends outside your comfort zone of peers. Identify what your goals are and who you need to forge strong professional relationships with to achieve those goals. Remember that strong and lasting relationships are two-way streets—always give first.

Here are suggestions on how to begin:

- Develop a relationship map that includes who you know, who you need to know, and how you will approach getting to know them. Enlist the guidance of your mentor and sponsor.
- Think broadly about the networks that will help propel your career forward. For example, if you aspire to become an equity partner, think about where you will meet and work with professionals who can become clients.
- Find ways to become visible to colleagues inside and outside your organization. Both networks are important. For example, volunteer for and/or take on leadership roles on committees that have measurable impact on the success of your organization or your personal growth.
- Most events and activities sponsored by your organization will be important for you to attend to meet new people and stay connected with those you already know. Make it your goal to connect with at least one new person. Find out not just what they do, but what interests them. If you want to establish a relationship, calendar time to reconnect.
- Become active on LinkedIn and other social media outlets that give you the opportunity to connect with others, share useful and thought-provoking content, and showcase your achievements.
- Begin your journey to becoming a thought leader by writing or co-writing articles in your substantive area. Being recognized in your field reaps extraordinary benefits.

No.6 FOCUS

In order to succeed you need to decide what success looks like for you. Then you need to plan to get there; a plan that will bring focus to your decision making and actions.

In deciding what success looks like for you, begin with the big picture—your personal vision, values, and core purpose. This will inform what you care about most in life your life—not just your career. Why does this matter? Because the journey to career fulfilment is long and difficult. What will help you to persevere is your purpose.

Here are some ways to keep you focused on what matters to you.

- Develop a written strategic career plan. The plan should be for a period between three to five years. Include interim goals.
- Set up an accountability buddy—someone who will hold you accountable to your commitments.
- Your career plan should take into account your strengths and your weaknesses. Then align both to learning goals that will improve both.
- Once you've written a draft of your plan, share it with your coach, mentor or confidante for feedback.
- Think of your plan as a living document that is front of mind. Calendar time to review your plan, acknowledge setbacks, and celebrate the milestones.
- Success in meeting the goals you've established in your 3-5-year plan will require an ongoing effort. An approach to help you stay focused and on track is for each week to write down three things you can do that week that will contribute to meeting those goals.

No.7 GROW

To grow is to evolve and stay relevant. At every point in your career think about how you will diversify your skills, establish credibility, contribute, influence, and lead. Remember that intrinsic parts of professional and personal growth are risks and failures. You will only true grow when you embrace both and accept that the only way to overcome your fear of them is to forge ahead anyway.

Here are some ways to build your growth mindset:

- Adopt a “beginner’s mind.” A concept from design thinking it means the ability to put aside your “expert hat” and be open and curious.
- Be curious and seek to learn new things, new experiences, new ways of looking at and solving problems—in and out of the legal industry.
- Glean as much insight and knowledge from the professionals inside and outside your organization. Seek to learn from those with a diversity of knowledge, experience and world-view—it will set you apart professionally and enrich your life personally.
- Read, listen, watch. There are a plethora of articles and books, podcasts, and videos on executive presence, leadership, mindset, public speaking, and more. Check out the “The Starter Kit: Things to Read & Listen To” on pages 10-11 of this primer.
- Take a live class outside your comfort zone. Some classes to consider: public speaking, improv, creative writing.

CONCLUSION

Think strategically about your contributions. A significant factor in your professional success will be your ability to not only do excellent work, but doing great work that has a measurable impact on the goals of your colleagues, your organization, and your networks. The cumulative effects of following the seven recommendations offered here are significant. How? They will shape you to become:

- A leader.
- An ambassador.
- A mentor.
- An advocate.
- A change maker.

THE STARTER KIT

Things to Read & Listen To

ARTICLES

- “Managing Yourself: Zoom In, Zoom Out,” Rosabeth Moss Kanter
<https://hbr.org/2011/03/managing-yourself-zoom-in-zoom-out>
- “The Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why,” Deborah Tannen
<https://hbr.org/1995/09/the-power-of-talk-who-gets-heard-and-why?ab=hbra-257>
- “A Lack of Sponsorship Is Keeping Women from Advancing into Leadership,” Herminia Ibarra,
<https://hbr.org/2019/08/a-lack-of-sponsorship-is-keeping-women-from-advancing-into-leadership?ab=hbra-257>
- “Have You Mapped Your Key Relationships?,” Madeleine Homan
<https://hbr.org/2008/02/have-you-mapped-your-key-relat>
- “Overcome Your Reluctance and Start Negotiating Your Salary,” Judith White
<https://hbr.org/2016/05/overcome-your-reluctance-and-start-negotiating-your-salary>
- “How Leaders Create and Use Networks,” Herminia Ibarra and Mark Lee Hunter,
<https://hbr.org/2007/01/how-leaders-create-and-use-networks>

BOOKS

- *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie, Andrew MacMillan, et al.
- *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Carol S. Dweck
- *To Sell Is Human: The Surprising Truth About Moving Others*, Daniel Pink
- *Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life...And Maybe the World*, Admiral William H. McRaven
- *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, Stephen R. Covey
- *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*,⁸ Angela Lee Duckworth

TED TALKS

- “My Year of Saying Yes to Everything,”⁹ Shonda Rhimes
https://www.ted.com/talks/shonda_rhimes_my_year_of_saying_yes_to_everything
- “The Power of Vulnerability,” Brené Brown
https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability?language=en

⁸ Also a TedTalk: The Power of Passion and Perseverance, Angela Lee Duckworth
https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_grit_the_power_of_passion_and_perseverance

⁹ Also a book: *Year of Yes: How to Dance It Out, Stand in the Sun and Be Your Own Person*, Shonda Rhimes

TED TALKS (continued)

- “Ten Ways to a Better Conversation,” Celeste Headlee
https://www.ted.com/talks/celeste_headlee_10_ways_to_have_a_better_conversation/transcript?referrer=playlist-the_10_most_popular_tedx_talks
- “The Happy Secret to Better Work,” Shawn Achor
https://www.ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work?referrer=playlist-the_10_most_popular_tedx_talks&language=en
- “How to Speak So People Want to Listen,” Julian Treasure
https://www.ted.com/talks/julian_treasure_how_to_speak_so_that_people_want_to_listen?referrer=playlist-the_most_popular_talks_of_all
- “Your Body Language Can Shape Who You Are,” Amy Cuddy
https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_may_shape_who_you_are?referrer=playlist-the_most_popular_talks_of_all