

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Bartlit's Rebecca Weinstein Bacon

Law360, New York (December 13, 2013, 1:10 PM ET) -- Rebecca Weinstein Bacon is a partner and trial lawyer with Bartlit Beck Herman Palenchar & Scott LLP in the firm's Chicago office. She represents clients in commercial litigation in a number of areas including antitrust, products liability, breach of contract and class action. In addition to her trial practice, she has argued before the Federal, Third and Eleventh Circuits.

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

A: I landed in Chicago through a twist of fate and found a firm that I thought was fascinating. I did not know I was joining a profession or a firm that some considered an old boys' network. The firm was a fairly young spin-off of a larger firm when I started and they did not start with many women. But I really liked the people — guys — that I worked with; they were/are funny, interesting and challenged me. That said, to the extent I "broke in," I did so by working hard and having a sense of humor. I went to trial eight months after I got to the firm, and while it was a grueling seven weeks, I loved it.

While many people are skeptical of law firm leadership, I work in a firm that is actually structured in a way that avoids the politics required for advancement in other firms. For example, the firm does not issue origination credit. This simple omission eliminates the sharp elbows that often serve as a barrier to women "breaking in." Law firm structure can do a lot to affect a woman partner's ability to succeed.

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

A: The numbers. There are not enough women in the firm that I can turn to as mentors. The numbers in firms across the country tell the same story — we need more senior women. Sometimes it can be a challenge to not be surrounded by your own gender at your level or above. I would love to have droves of senior women ahead of me to turn to. That said, I have amazing male mentors in my own firm and female mentors in different organizations and it's exciting to see the number of younger women coming up at the firm.

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

A: When I was a young partner, I was working on a mass tort litigation that involved class allegations. I went with an associate to take the deposition of a class representative. The lawyer defending the deposition was a high-profile plaintiff lawyer. When we walked into the room, the plaintiff lawyer turned to me and said, "What? Did Phil send 'the Beckettes?'" (Phil Beck is one of the founders of Bartlit Beck.) He made a number of other comments during the deposition designed to intimidate me by playing on gender and my relative youth. How did I deal with it? I thought to myself, "I am going to

knock this deposition out of the park.” When clips from that deposition were excerpted at the class certification hearing, it was special. We defeated class certification.

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

A: Two pieces of advice: Don’t take yourself too seriously, and be true to yourself.

This is a very serious job, but you can take yourself too seriously and run the risk that you will stop learning from those around you. You’re not so important. Learn from your colleagues and don’t lose the ability to laugh at yourself. Find those people that keep you real and give you honest feedback. I treasure these people in my life: They are within my firm and outside of my firm; they are women and they are men; they are older than me and younger than me; they are lawyers and nonlawyers.

Be true to yourself. If you are true to your values and to who you are as a person, you will feel good about this job and hopefully clients, witnesses, judges and juries will trust you and connect with you. I will never be the gun-slinging type, but I have my own style and my own vision for how to do this job. It works, most of the time, for me.

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

A: Hire women associates and then keep them. Given today’s job market it is not difficult to hire women associates, but as all law firm numbers tell us, not enough associates stay into the partner or senior partner ranks. Firms should be proactive with their women lawyers: Seek out their opinions, involve them in pitches, and include them in official or unofficial firm leadership. Not every woman wants to “lean in” but for those that do, make sure you take notice. Little things can make a big difference in terms of retention. If you take time to show a person that their voice matters, you can inspire a lot of loyalty.

Also, stand by your women if they choose to have children and help them through those years. My own “procreation years” (as I refer to them) were not easy — they are difficult to maneuver in this job both emotionally and physically. But I emerged on the other side of those years with renewed energy and excitement for my profession. It would have been a shame, for me, if I had opted out for something different. I fear we lose many great lawyers because law firms do not do more than give them maternity leave and lip service for part-time work. Of course, being a mother to three children is not without its challenges once they pass the toddler phase — but those early years can be harrowing.

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

A: Lisa Pattis, the general counsel of Wintrust Financial Corporation. She has a senior legal position in the financial sector, supports philanthropic endeavors, like Women Employed, and is raising a close-knit family. I am also impressed with the group of women that she surrounds herself with. She is one of those people that even the most hard-nosed women turn to when they need anything from career advice to the right tailor. She also has a sarcastic sense of humor. I love sarcasm.

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