

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Orrick's Laurie Strauch Weiss

Law360, New York (January 30, 2014, 2:25 PM ET) -- Laurie Strauch Weiss is a partner in Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP's New York office and head of the mass torts and product liability practice. She is a member of the Product Liability Law360's editorial advisory board, and is a frequent lecturer, author and media source on topics concerning mass torts, complex scientific issues and expert witnesses.

Her practice focuses on large, complex and multiparty class action litigation, and she has handled actions involving the chemical, tobacco and medical device industries. She was recently named to the 2013 "Top 250 Women in Litigation" by Benchmark Litigation and recognized in Euromoney's 2013 Expert Guide to Women in Business Law for Product Liability.

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

A: As class of '92, I never considered my professional path as having obstacles to break through such as "an old boys' network." It was to my mind a nonissue for the most part. I was brought up with the idea that you could pursue whatever you wanted to achieve, and I have always sought to be the best that I could be in terms of offering strategic client service and doing substantive legal work — regardless of gender.

I think my inner confidence that I belong where I am as long as I have something to contribute (rather than fostering an "us vs. them" gender construct) has served me well throughout my career. That — and having a sense of humor — when occasionally dealing with those with a different view have proved invaluable.

I have also found that I had to learn to "toot my own horn" in a polite, but firm manner in a variety of settings, whether seeking assignments early on and work that I wished to do, broadcasting my expertise and achievements, or developing and maintaining client relationships.

My mentors have predominantly been men, and I never really thought about that before, but I do believe the emphasis on having same-gender role models may be misplaced and that it should be the person to whom you relate and who can be a business and opportunity mentor to you regardless of whether that person is male or female. And that you should find a variety of mentors throughout your career — find them and use them. I hope to be a good mentor to those coming up the ranks.

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

A: The extra time and focus that is required to actively manage and continually grow a business on top

of your day-to-day legal client focused work. As a member of Orrick's management, having that role adds to an already full life and thus leads to that often discussed — but from my standpoint — ephemeral — idea of “life balance.”

Right now, with two children ages 6 and 10, I find that it is my personal “down time” that gives. This past August, I found myself heading off to a last-minute business pitch in Beijing (the third trip to China of the year), and thought about when I first started out, the notion of “pitching” for “business” let alone in “China” would have had partners recoiling. Now, that is a reality of our practice and it adds to the “time” issue. Business is not just handed down, you have to go out and pitch halfway around the world for that large case.

Until you have children, you simply do not know how you are going — realistically — to juggle that added incredible dimension of your life. And once I became a mother, and I wanted to be an involved parent as well as remain and grow where I was in my career, I found it a never-ending exercise in actively deciding how I choose to spend my time.

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

A: Not sure if it was sexism or just being a young associate at the time being pitted against a senior male lawyer blowhard who believed that a loud, belligerent attitude would cause me to back down in our negotiation. I learned to listen, wait and not let it get under my skin — and periodically ask, “Are you done screaming yet?” I would then calmly make my points after he had exhausted his voice. I have found that a sense of humor goes a long way to smoothing out irritating situations.

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

A: Don't wait until years pass to focus on business development and developing a name for yourself in an area of specific expertise. These skills, contacts and relationships take years to nurture and develop. Obviously it helps to work with a partner who trusts you enough to give you client access, credit for your work and “facetime” if you are working on a large case.

Consider (and answer) the question: “Why should someone pick up the phone and call YOU?” If the client is asking for you it is easier to argue for greater responsibility, compensation and recognition. You have personal leverage and options. It goes without saying that one needs to be an excellent legal mind, but that is not nearly sufficient in this field.

You need to see the big picture and be entrepreneurial. We don't sit on the laurels of our last successful motion to dismiss and wait for more cases to come to us. I would stress that you need to stand up for yourself in seeking credit when it is a team effort — being recognized for your contributions that might not be all hours based. And I would think hard about the obligations you take on in your business life — if you enjoy them and if they will assist you in what you want to be doing in life.

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

A: There is no one-size-fits-all, and this is a problem I don't pretend to be able to solve. But I believe that Orrick (once again in 2013 Working Mother and Flex-Time Lawyers' 50 Best Law Firms for Women) has tried to address this issue by having a flexible and customized approach to associates' careers that is not gender-based, and I am proud that we have that at Orrick.

While many of my generation had children once they became partners, many younger associates are choosing to have families as they come up through the ranks. A generous maternity leave, return “ramp-up” policy and so-called “custom track” for those who do not want to practice at 100 percent time is necessary. Whether these firm programs will actually increase partner ranks remains to be seen. I am a realist, and becoming a partner today means that one must present a compelling business case and amass a legal expertise portfolio which requires a ton of work, client relationships and frankly, good timing and luck.

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

A: One of the most compelling role models I admire is one of my clients early in my legal career — Mary Terzino, then an assistant general counsel of The Dow Chemical Company, and responsible at the time for all of the massive silicone breast implant litigation. Her strategic and thoughtful legal approach and command of numerous legal teams was impressive and she gave me — a relatively young associate at the time — the trust and “you go girl” recognition that was often needed, and greatly appreciated, in grueling litigation fought over many years. I think I still have a few of her early “thanks” emails which I kept for inspiration.

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