

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: White And Williams' Patti Santelle

Law360, New York (December 12, 2013, 2:23 PM ET) -- Patricia B. Santelle is managing partner at White and Williams LLP. She chairs the firm's executive committee and commercial litigation department, and co-chairs the insurance coverage and bad faith group. She specializes in representing and advising insurance companies in matters involving asbestos, environmental, toxic tort and long-tail claims. She is a member of the firm's executive and compensation committees.

She is a former member and past chairwoman of the District IV Ethics Committee in New Jersey and has been twice appointed by the Supreme Court of New Jersey to serve as a special master on complex ethics proceedings in New Jersey. She is past chancellor of the board of the Rutgers-Camden Law Alumni Association. In 2010, she received the Scarlet Oak Meritorious Service Award by Rutgers University for her contributions as an alumni leader at Rutgers-Camden Law. She is also president of the board of trustees of the C. Wallace Stuard Sailing Foundation.

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

A: I have worked very hard to develop strong and important client relationships. I have found it is so important to connect with clients on a personal level. This happens when you open up about things happening in your own life, so that the client feels comfortable doing the same. It is nice to have lunch or take a client to a sporting event, but that is not always personal or feasible, particularly for my clients who are female. Instead I work very hard to develop the personal relationship with the time that we have, be it a phone call or meeting. The result is that most of my clients are my close friends.

I have also worked to gain the respect of my colleagues, both adversaries and co-counsel. In this respect, I have found that diplomacy goes a long way. Several months ago, I spoke to the class of seventh-grade girls at a local public school that our firm sponsors. I told them that when I was their age I thought I should become a lawyer because I was good at arguing my way out of things. But over time I realized that what really makes a good lawyer is listening and understanding the other side's position. Only then can you persuade them to agree with your view. Diplomacy has not only helped me to become a successful lawyer, but this understanding of what is important to others has also helped me move up in firm management.

Lastly, I am always prepared and responsive. That goes for clients as well as administrative duties in the office. If I have an internal meeting, I am always prepared — I treat my firm responsibilities the same as my client responsibilities.

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

A: The challenge is twofold: How do we get more women in firm management, and how do we get female associates to stick around for the long haul?

I am often the only woman at the table. I can definitely handle it, but it is a real issue that firms face. At my firm, I am the only female department chair and the only woman on the executive committee in a full-term position. And I am one of only a very few women at our departmental and practice group meetings. This needs to change.

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

A: I can think of one specific time. It was when I was up for partner. A former male partner pulled me aside and made a comment, which I will not repeat, that pertained to the fact that I was a female up for partnership. While I was taken aback, I quickly composed myself and told him that he really should not have said what he said, and I would do him a favor of forgetting it. Although I rarely mention it, I have never forgotten it either.

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

A: I would tell an aspiring female attorney the same thing I would tell an aspiring male attorney, which are the same traits that I attribute to my own success: Work hard to develop strong, important client relationships; work hard to gain the respect of colleagues; and always be prepared and responsive.

In addition, some advice specifically for female attorneys would include: Do not ever change your personality or feel that you have to be something different to succeed. I generally have a smile on my face, and maintain as positive an attitude as possible in the office — when I was an associate at another firm, a partner went to the trouble of submitting a written evaluation form on me solely for the purpose of saying that he/she appreciated that I always had a smile on my face. There is nothing wrong with being friendly as well as feminine and no need to act like someone you are not in order to succeed.

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

A: I suggest that firms bring their female attorneys together often to discuss issues they are facing and suggest resolutions. And just as important, ensure the firm management is aware of the unique issues that women in the firm face. Last year, I helped to organize an informal meeting of female attorneys at the firm, at which I learned that it had been some time since we had updated our maternity leave policy, and, as a result of that meeting, we did. We also have informal social gatherings of the female attorneys at the firm.

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

A: Attorney Stella Tsai, a business litigation partner at Archer & Greiner PC, is a close friend whom I met on a coverage case in the early 1990s. Stella is extremely passionate about the law, but she is just as passionate about giving back to the community (legal and otherwise) and her family. She has found a remarkable balance between her law practice, her community/charitable work and her commitment to her family. In addition, she is just a true pleasure to be around.

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