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Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Cole Schotz's Randi Kochman

Law360, New York (January 17, 2014, 12:29 PM ET) -- Randi W. Kochman is a partner in Cole Schotz Meisel Forman & Leonard PA's Hackensack, N.J., office, where she chairs the firm's employment law department. She brings nearly 20 years of employment law experience to work closely with her clients in all types of employment-related contexts, including wrongful discharge, discrimination, retaliation, harassment, wage and hour compliance, contract disputes, restrictive covenant, unfair competition and trade secret matters in state and federal courts and administrative agencies.

Kochman has been involved with the Commerce and Industry Association of New Jersey, as a member of the Steering Committee for its Human Resource Council. She has also been actively involved with the New Jersey Women Lawyers' Association, holding various leadership positions, including president-elect. She is also a recipient of the New Jersey Commission on Professionalism In the Law's 2013 NJWLA's Professional Lawyer of the Year Award.

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

A: Hard work, an ability and desire to work with all types of people, and an unwillingness to accept the status quo. I think that professionalism, integrity and a commitment to being the best attorney one can be is gender-blind, and following those goals has always served me well. So, although I am extremely sensitive and dedicated to women's issues in the legal profession, I never considered myself a woman before being the best attorney I could be. Working in a firm that is a meritocracy, I was able to succeed based on my work, dedication and attitude.

I also attribute my accomplishments to being proactive in asking my firm for what I needed to be successful. Soon after I had my first child in 1999, I asked for "flex-time." Although my firm had part-time attorneys previously, I was the first person in my firm to request flex-time. Now, such arrangements are commonplace in my firm and many others, but this was many years ago. I recall being very fearful about making the request, and yet I knew I needed some flexibility to make my career and life work. When Cole Schotz readily agreed to the proposed arrangement, I felt valued and was able to tackle the demands of work and family in a more personally fulfilling way. I still recall one of my senior male partners referring to a legal career as a "marathon" and acknowledging that attorneys (male and female) will have different needs along the way.

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

A: I truly believe that men and women differ in the manner in which they consider issues and communicate and these diverse perspectives are needed and helpful in a law firm. Working through such differences for a common purpose is both rewarding and challenging at the same time. There are times when it would be helpful to have more women "at the table,"

although that is not to say that all women look at issues the same way.

In addition to such challenges, however, I have realized benefits from being a woman at a senior level. I have learned a great deal from, and have enjoyed the company of, very experienced male colleagues and have never felt marginalized because I am a woman. I also have the privilege of being a role model for the women who follow me and feel satisfied knowing that I am helping others with the benefit of my experience.

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

A: There have been a couple of times during my career when clients have not wished to work with me because I am a woman, although usually they are not so blatant about this as a reason. I recall feeling discouraged, but handled these disappointing situations by graciously honoring the clients' request, knowing that it was their loss.

Of course, most female attorneys have experienced difficult adversaries as well, and there have been times when male attorneys have treated me in a less than professional manner based on my gender. I always have tried to avoid personalizing such situations, and to stay focused on the case and obtaining the best results for my clients.

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

A: My advice is to always follow your own style and instincts, even from your earliest days as a lawyer. During my early career, I sometimes thought I should try to emulate the style of other more senior attorneys, many of whom were men who had an approach (typically, more belligerent) with which I was not comfortable. Trying to be something I was not created unnecessary anxiety and made practicing law a difficult experience. Once I realized the type of professional and lawyer I wanted to be, things quickly fell into place.

Similarly, I have found that many aspiring female attorneys struggle with confidence and because of this may not challenge themselves to grow in the profession. I strongly suggest that female attorneys move out of their comfort zones, early on, and take on projects and tasks that terrify them. "Leaning in" is the only way to grow and develop the much-needed confidence that will prove crucial in the future.

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

A: My advice would be for firm management to constantly look at things from a new perspective and get input from all levels in the firm. Handling things the "old way" is not always in the best interest of attorneys, both male and female, or of clients. In addition, I think it is very important for firms to mentor and place women in leadership roles so that young aspiring female attorneys have in-house role models to whom they can look for inspiration and guidance and so that female voices are heard on firm matters. Firms must also help female attorneys develop and grow in the all-important area of business development, because we know that women and men handle this aspect of the law quite differently.

As a general rule, women are looking for many things in a law firm, including flexibility, collegiality, support and challenging work. In my opinion, law firms that are attractive to women (and to men) consider their attorneys as people and not just as a billable hour. Often this makes all the difference.

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

A: One attorney who stands out in my mind is Kirsten Branigan of the Law Office of Kirsten

S. Branigan. Although Kirsten is a terrific attorney, I admire her even more for her dedication to the needs of women in the profession.

In 2006, Kirsten lead the revitalization of the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association, an organization that means a lot to me. In 2006, at a time when there were very few resources for women in the profession, Kirsten saw a need for a professional organization geared toward retaining women in the profession, mentoring women attorneys and supporting and promoting its members to the highest levels of law firm, government, academia, community organizations, corporations and the judiciary. All these years later, Kirsten still works tirelessly for the organization, benefiting female attorneys in all parts of the profession.

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