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Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Gibbons' Christine Amalfe

Law360, New York (February 03, 2014, 1:59 PM ET) -- Christine Amalfe chairs the employment and labor law department at Gibbons PC and serves on the firm's executive committee and as its human resources general counsel. She defends single-plaintiff, multiplaintiff and class claims under state and federal employment laws, as well as state and federal whistleblower claims. She defends actions before FINRA, the NFA, and the AAA. She also represents defendants in actions alleging trade secret misappropriation, breach of contract, intentional infliction of emotional distress, breach of fiduciary duty, violation of restrictive covenants, negligent supervision, fraud, and negligent misrepresentation. Additionally, Amalfe conducts training for clients. She serves on the New Jersey Supreme Court Advisory Committee on Expedited Civil Actions.

She is dedicated to women's professional advancement. She co-founded the Catalyst Award-winning Gibbons women's initiative. She holds the New Jersey State Bar Association's at-large trustee position reserved for a woman (having previously been trustee for its Women in the Profession Section and on its Task Force on Work-Life Balance). She is president of the National Association of Women Lawyers Foundation and a member of New Jersey Women Lawyers Association and New Jersey Council on Gender Parity.

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

A: The simple answer is, I decided to do what I loved. As a child, I wanted to be a sportscaster, which was even more of an old boys' network than the legal profession; if you were not a Miss America, your options were limited. Ultimately, I chose a legal career because it offers opportunities to be creative, think strategically, and help clients address concrete, immediate business issues. As I began practicing, I also began to appreciate the scope of the business and managerial functions afforded by law firm practice, including business development and practice management, which fit nicely with my interests and business school education.

When I began the practice of law, I was lucky enough to have two wonderful men act as my mentors and sponsors. Although we didn't use those labels at the time, one taught me to be an excellent trial lawyer and the other taught me about the business of law. They both offered me opportunities and pushed me to widen my net and leave my comfort zone. I worked hard for both of them, and they, in turn, assisted me every step of the way as I ascended the ladder from second chair to first chair, from associate to partner, from partner to executive committee member and from group member to practice group leader.

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

A: Research makes clear that women take on the lion's share of family responsibilities even in two-income households. As a result, work-life balance is one of the biggest challenges for female executives in any industry. In the legal industry in particular, the professional infrastructure and widespread attitudes as well as the important "billable hour" make it difficult to achieve optimum work-life balance. Women attorneys also face a distinctly difficult challenge in balancing substantial billable hours and also the significant nonbillable hours required to advance to leadership positions in their firms and to develop business that will allow them to ascend to equity partnership status. Women lag behind men in their involvement in after-hours professional endeavors and, as a result, also lag behind men in rainmaking. Unfortunately, this holds women back from senior-level positions in law firms and also impacts their compensation.

This is an issue I have worked on extensively throughout my career. The solutions are not self-evident. I have served as trustee for the New Jersey Women Lawyers' Association and for the New Jersey State Bar Association's (NJSBA) Women in the Profession Section. I have worked on the NJSBA's Task Force on Work-Life Balance. I am the president of the NAWL Foundation. In all of these roles, I have closely examined these challenges and all of these groups have made efforts to identify potential solutions. Unfortunately, none of those solutions, even when implemented in good faith, have made a marked difference in moving women to the senior ranks within law firms at the same rate as comparable men.

I hope to make a greater difference going forward. I was recently elected at-large trustee of the NJSBA. In this position, which is designated for a woman, I will advocate for women lawyers of the state and work to increase their involvement in the bar association and beyond. I will also continue to press for more focus and more resources to try to assist women lawyers as they seek to ascend to equity partnership status.

Between 2007 and 2009, I helped spearhead and shepherd through to completion the New Jersey Gender Parity Council's exhaustive study of the state's legal industry. The detailed report included key findings that women seek out law firms with flexible policies and where work life balance is supported. And while such flexibility has increased and made it easier for women to remain in the profession, it has not assisted women to rise to the higher levels within the law firm structure. The focus now has to be on moving the needle on the number of women equity partners and educating women on how they can achieve their goals.

On a more personal level, I am the mother of three children, ages 19, 17 and 12. Over my 20-plus years at Gibbons, I have always worked full-time. With the ability to control my schedule most of the time, I have been able to progress in my career while at the same time attending my children's games and school events, volunteering for causes important to me, and providing care and companionship to my two 90-year-old parents. The challenge begins every day when I wake up, but with the support of family, friends and the firm's policies and practices, I have been able to overcome the obstacles and reach my goals.

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

A: I have always tried to be accepted for who I am, and not based on my gender. Unfortunately, however, on occasion over the years I have encountered sexism. When it occurs, I have chosen to deal with it professionally, directly and quickly. I find that most offenders are embarrassed when they are called out as engaging in sexism or sexual harassment. Most offenders do not expect an immediate reaction or response. Even those who are not embarrassed generally understand quickly that they can not continue to engage in the conduct at issue without risking some type of repercussion.

On a trip to Japan for client meetings, it became apparent to me that a good deal of business was done after dinner at the hostess bars. I was not invited to attend. I suggested to my client contact that I would like to participate in these business discussions and that I should also come along to the hostess bar after dinner. I was then reluctantly invited and did participate in the after-hours meetings.

After a few nights, it was expected that I would be there. The meetings were important, and they were a chance to build strong relationships with the business people and the lawyers for my client. While I could have objected and stated I did not want to attend, I understood the culture and the need to do business as it is done in that country. It was sexism to leave me out. Once everyone involved understood that I wanted to be there and that it was important for me to be there, the issue was behind us.

Thankfully, for the most part, my clients have always appreciated my hard work and dedication to their causes, and the issues of sexism and harassment have not been issues at all. Indeed, it is often my male clients who are more offended than I am when incidents do occur. Clearly, in 2013, there is less sexism in the profession than there was in 1985. The cultures of the law firm and the courthouse have evolved, and women are now part of the fabric of each, causing sexism to be the unusual occurrence rather than the norm.

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

A: Learn to be an excellent lawyer. Work hard and be dedicated to the cause. Look for opportunities, leave your comfort zone, and, when opportunities present themselves, do not say no. Find a mentor. If you are still a student, identify a female professor with whom you have interests in common. If you are a junior attorney at a law firm, work with a more senior associate or partner. A mentor can pass along an extraordinary amount of institutional insight into your firm, help pave the way for you to succeed, and help you develop an action plan for reaching your goals.

In addition, if you are able to match up with one of your firm's female leaders — a department chair, practice group leader, branch office director, executive committee member — you can glean leadership preparation advice and learn about the characteristics of an effective leader. Going to the office every day and working hard is critical, but so is developing relationships, seeking out opportunities, and taking control of your own career development.

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

A: Firms that proactively address work-life balance concerns and professional development of their lawyers (male and female) have seen a resulting increase in the diversity of their workforce, decrease in unwanted loss of lawyers along the way to partnership, and increase to bottom-line revenues and profits. A law firm needs to create a distinctive business strategy that includes and promotes diversity and inclusion. Then, in the context of that business strategy, the firm should implement initiatives, policies and benefits that promote the balance that all professionals need. The vision and commitment must come from the top, and the importance of the strategy must be reinforced continuously.

There have been numerous successful programs established to help women attorneys balance their work and personal lives and achieve professional success. Many firms have adopted reduced hours policies. While it may take a longer time for the reduced-hours associate to gain membership into the partnership, the attorney can and does remain on the partnership track.

Emergency child care programs have also proven effective in easing the stress and anxiety often associated with the demands of law firm life. Firms can additionally bolster their female partnership numbers through technology initiatives that give professionals the flexibility to work remotely. Firms can also identify the up-and-coming stars and provide them with professional development and mentoring, and otherwise directly assist them in the journey to the top.

These policies can emanate from a carefully considered and executed women's initiative. Women's initiatives can help firms increase the number of women in partner positions, as well as in executive management and leadership roles. They can provide opportunities to women by implementing progressive policies and developing programs to train the rainmakers of the future.

Importantly, women's initiatives can extend beyond a firm's own attorney base to engage female clients, prospects and other business leaders, thus helping the firm's women attorneys to nurture and expand relationships. The networking opportunities offered through well-run women's initiatives help women both within and outside law firm to independently build their careers and their professional relationships.

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

A: After establishing Seton Hall University's first in-house legal office in 1989, Catherine Kiernan was named the school's vice president and general counsel in 1997. She handles all legal work for the university, which comprises eight schools, including a top-tier law school, graduate medical school, and college of nursing, along with a NCAA Division I athletic program and \$250 million annual operating budget.

She directs and manages the office of general counsel and outside legal counsel, as well as the compliance, risk management, insurance and internal audit functions. Ms. Kiernan is measured, smart, in complete command of the facts and the needs of the university, and, at all times, supportive to outside counsel. She seeks guidance from outside counsel when appropriate but approaches each engagement with well-thought-out personal views of the legal issues at hand and a strategy for an effective

resolution.

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