

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Paul Hastings' Elizabeth Noe

Law360, New York (December 13, 2013, 1:11 PM ET) -- Elizabeth Hardy Noe is chairwoman of the global corporate department of Paul Hastings LLP and has served in this position since 2010. Prior to that time she was co-chairwoman of attorney development for the firm. She is a partner in the firm's Atlanta office. She has an active transactional practice concentrated in securities and corporate finance matters, mergers and acquisitions and corporate governance. Her experience in securities matters includes representation of issuers and underwriters in public and private equity and debt offerings (with particular experience with Rule 144A high yield offerings) and representation of public companies regarding securities and reporting compliance. She frequently advises boards of directors of public and private companies (including board special committees) regarding corporate governance issues and the discharge of fiduciary duties in connection with extraordinary corporate transactions.

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

A: I grew up in a household of women and went to a woman's college, so I had many strong female role models. As a result, I grew up with the belief that I could do anything I wanted to. So, I was actually surprised when I first encountered people (including other lawyers and some clients) who questioned if I was suited to negotiate with them, provide advice to them or move up the ranks of a law firm because I was female.

But, I dealt with these attitudes by remaining focused, and confident in my abilities. I sometimes see women who begin to doubt their leadership abilities or negotiating skills because they internalize the attitudes of others. Instead, I watched and learned from others (men and women) who were adept at "playing the game" and sought advice and assistance from those I trusted. I also learned the importance of entering a room as a leader, taking the floor when the opportunity arises and staking out my role in the transaction. How you "sit at the table" plays a big role in how you are perceived by others. I also seized challenging opportunities throughout my career, ultimately leading to the opportunity to chair Paul Hastings corporate practice.

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

A: For the most part, I think the challenges are the same ones faced by anyone at a senior level: motivating teams to perform, addressing performance issues with grace and clarity, communicating clearly and in a manner to cause others to follow you. As a woman, I do think about communication style, as well as content. Because men and women communicate differently in the workplace, I try to understand how I will be perceived or if I may be misunderstood because of communication differences or differences of perception.

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

A: Early in my career, I was asked to mark up a document for a client. It was a document that I was not all that familiar with, so I went the extra mile to review precedent and ask for everything I should on my client's behalf — which meant I provided a very heavy one-sided markup. I explained to the client that we should not expect the other side to accept everything. When we got the document back, they had accepted all changes. We were puzzled so my client asked the business guy on the other side what happened. He checked with his attorney, who said, "Oh, you know those little lady lawyers, the only way you can get them to shut up is to give them what they ask for." My client and I decided that since his sexism had worked directly in our favor, we would just let that one slide!

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

A: There are unwritten rules and understanding them and learning to work within them is key to success — whether it is understanding how to "sit at the table" or figuring out how to be one of those routinely chosen to be included in teams, informal and formal, — it all stems from knowing the game that others are playing. Being thoughtful about your approach and style and taking advantage of the opportunities and advice provided are important elements of development.

I would also advise that young women choose their battles. We still work in an environment where they will from time to time perceive they are treated differently (intentionally or unintentionally). If the treatment will impair their advancement, for example, not being chosen for an assignment because the senior lawyer assumes they do not want to travel away from their family, they need to find a way to raise concern and express their desire to get good assignments. In other situations, deflating the issue with humor or simply ignoring the slight may be the better course.

I would also advise aspiring women lawyers to read two books, "Lean In" and "Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman."

Corporate America, including law firms, may need to do more to create more opportunity for women, but someone trying to succeed today has to do so in the environment as it exists.

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

A: First, make it clear to partners that mentoring and developing the high-potential women associates in the firm is a top priority of management, through the partner evaluation system and by providing concrete examples of success. Second, talk to the rising star women associates to understand what they need. Firms that simply assume they know the challenges that their associates face and the assistance they need to develop can make big mistakes. Tailoring your development programs to the actual needs of your people will pay off.

Further, it is not enough to simply increase the number of women making partner. For long-term success, a firm must have women partners in positions of leadership. At Paul Hastings, the focus on continuing to develop talented women lawyers does not stop once the partnership vote is held. For example, two of our five department chairs are women, over 40 percent of our policy committee (our management committee) members are women, and women serve as office chairs, practice group and client team leaders throughout the firm.

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

A: There are many, but after having recently finished reading her book “My Beloved World,” I have to say the top of my list is Sonia Sotomayor. She provides a fabulous example of the opportunities you can create for yourself by believing in your abilities, not taking the first answer as the final and fighting for what you know is right without becoming someone that others dread having to deal with. She did not come from a privileged background, but she did not let the possibly perceived deficit or the attitudes and beliefs of others define her perception of herself or of the world around her.

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