Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Frost Brown Todd's Beth Naylor

Law360, New York (May 16, 2014, 1:37 PM ET) -- Beth Schneider Naylor is the senior member of Frost Brown Todd LLC's products liability practice group in Ohio. She provides national litigation management and preventive product safety counseling to U.S. and foreign manufacturers and distributors in a range of industries. She has served on the firm governance committee and has co-chaired the products liability practice group.

She founded and chaired the firms Women's Initiative. In 2006, she was named one of Cincinnati's "Top 10 Women Bosses," and in 2011, the firm's "Mentor of the Year." In 2013, she received the "Ohio Glass Ceiling Award" from the National Diversity Council and Council on Women for outstanding leadership by professional women who are making it possible for others to follow in their footsteps, and was named an Athena Award Finalist by Cincy Magazine. Naylor serves on the board of her alma mater, University of Notre Dame Law School, where she was elected president for 2012-2013.

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

A: One of my fondest memories from my days as a young associate trying to survive in a large law firm was the day I broke into the circle of associates who were perceived to be the top performers. The group was all male and I was the only female associate invited to lunch, where I was told that I was "one of the guys." I was bursting with pride! Growing up in the 1970s, young women were told they could be as good as men, which often translated to "be like men." The key was learning how to compete with men without losing your distinct advantage as a woman with more refined perceptve skills and intuition. As a child and through college, I participated in and enjoyed competitive sports, which, at the time, was very much a men's world. I was a tough competitor and could talk about any sport with the best of the guys. I credit competitive sports for teaching me how to compete, be a good teammate and other life lessons that have served me well in a profession dominated by "old boys."

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

A: Overcoming deeply engrained sociological gender norms in our society both in the way I behave and the way others perceive me. I am encouraged, however, with the amount of research that is being done on this topic to identify the sociological gender norms that are completely without basis which hinder women's professional advancement. Within the first minutes of meeting a man, I can usually tell if he is intimidated by strong women. It is a sixth sense that I have developed to survive. That does not always mean altering my behavior but being more aware of these deeply engrained gender norms can be beneficial.

Q: Describe a time you encountered sexism in your career and tell us how you handled it.
A: As a senior associate, I was called into the office of a male partner who was on the phone with a client who had just been sued. The client was an older gentleman who was indignant that his company had been sued. When the partner introduced me as the attorney who would be defending his case, the client said, “Well, I am not sure that I like that; I want someone who is going to tear that *#!%^*! [opponent] apart!” Then he asked, “Can you handle that; are you aggressive enough?” I could have easily answered in the affirmative, however, the question just did not sit right with me, so I responded, “If all you care about is how aggressive your attorney is, you are correct, I am not the right person. If, on the other hand, you want an attorney who is strategic and smart enough to know when to be aggressive and when to step back or maneuver in order to prevail, then I am the right person.” I defended the case.

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

A: More so for women than men, professional and personal success is inextricably intertwined. Early in your career, establish your priorities, values, goals and aspirations for life, not just your career. Do not apologize for the priorities you set and, more importantly, never use them as excuses for performing at a lower level than you expect of yourself. Continually revisit your life goals during critical career junctures and make decisions consistent with your goals, not some predetermined rigid career path that may have worked during the days of “Mad Men.”

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

A: Law firms tend to be narcissistic. Steeped in tradition and precedent, law firms are loath to believe that there are multiple paths to being a successful partner other than the one taken and endorsed by firm management. This remains true despite much lip service to diversity. Many women partners who are thriving have achieved success using nontraditional channels. Each one’s experience is slightly different from the next but universally their experiences enrich the culture of their firms. Successful law firms of the future will be entrepreneurial and innovative understanding that excellent and productive lawyers come in all shapes, sizes, genders, colors and races. Many of these forward-thinking firms will look for unique talent with a diverse wealth of experiences. Those are the firms that will attract the top women lawyers.

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

A: Holly M. Polglase, a partner at Hermes Netburn O’Connor & Spearing PC based in Boston. Holly is smart, confident, hard working, funny and extremely practical. Those attributes serve her clients well and make Holly a great person to work with and/or seek counsel from. Holly and I came up through the products liability ranks during the era where the old boys had a white-knuckle grip on most of the major U.S. manufacturers. The success she has had in client development despite obstacles is extraordinary. I think that it is Holly’s combination of common sense and humor that makes her so unique.

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