

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Gibson Dunn's Mary Murphy

Law360, New York (December 09, 2013, 3:52 PM ET) -- Mary G. Murphy is the partner-in-charge of the San Francisco office of Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP and co-chairs the firm's land use and development practice group. She represents developers and investors in real estate transactions and land use issues, with particular experience in historic preservation and tax credits for historic rehabilitation projects.

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

A: When I think of an old boy's network, my practice area of real estate comes to mind more than practicing law in a private law firm. My "break" into land use came because I was involved in my local community and came to the attention of the mayor of San Francisco. The mayor appointed me to a city commission, and I was then later appointed by President Clinton (and reappointed by President Bush 43) to the board of a federal agency called the Presidio Trust, in part with the support of three women, namely, Rep. Nany Pelosi and Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein.

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

A: I think the challenges facing senior women are very much like those facing senior men. Being a more senior lawyer means having more responsibility for others and playing multiple roles within the firm. You must continue to serve clients while running the business and training younger people in their craft. I think the biggest challenge for lawyers is that law firms do a good job training people to be lawyers, but do not consciously devote as much effort to training senior lawyers to be managers.

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

A: I recently witnessed sexism in action at a big meeting. I was standing next to another woman who was the chief executive of one of the negotiating parties. A group of men from the other negotiating party entered the room, walked right past the two of us and went immediately to shake the hands of her subordinates, who happened to be men. When I shot her a look, she said, "I am so glad I have a witness to this! This sort of stuff happens to me all the time."

I think all women have similar experiences throughout their career (myself included), but the most insidious sexism I experienced was the expectation that once I became a mother that I was somehow no longer serious about my career. I strongly believe that firms are best served by supporting their working parents, and working mothers in particular, to help them get through that very busy period when their children are young. Sheryl Sandberg cautions women not to give up too early and I would underscore that message to their firms as well.

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

A: When you are first starting out, try to find your own style and speak in your own authentic voice. If you become a mom during your career, hang in there through the busy years when your kids are young. It definitely gets easier as time passes.

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

A: There are at least three recommendations I would make: (1) ensure all associates are getting adequate mentoring and training; (2) provide flexibility and support for those associates with family or other responsibilities to assist them in “staying in the game” through periods of their life when their outside obligations are most pressing; and (3) look for opportunities for good lateral hires and pursue them.

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

A: I admire Jackie Moore, the general counsel of Divcowest. I have had the pleasure of working with Jackie as a colleague and serving her as a client, both at Divcowest and Wilson Equity Office. Jackie is amazingly intelligent, sensible, industrious, creative and a person of absolute unimpeachable personal integrity. I hold her in the highest personal regard in every respect.

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