

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Edwards Wildman's Brown

Law360, New York (March 07, 2014, 2:25 PM ET) -- Paulette Brown is a partner in Edwards Wildman Palmer LLP's Morristown, N.J., office and the firm's chief diversity officer. She is a member of the firm's labor and employment practice group. Throughout her career of more than 35 years, she has held a number of positions, including in-house counsel to a number of Fortune 500 companies and as a municipal court judge.

She is a member of the American Law Institute and 1st vice chair of the Labor and Employment Section of the New Jersey State Bar Association. She has been recognized by the National Law Journal as one of "The 50 Most Influential Minority Lawyers in America" and repeatedly been named by US News as one of the Best Lawyers in America in the area of Commercial Litigation. She has won numerous awards, including the National Bar Association's Gertrude Rush Award and the ABA Margaret Brent and Spirit of Excellence Awards.

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

A: It's a combination of persistence, insistence and remaining in a constant state of readiness. I tried very hard not to have the word, "no" in my vocabulary. That is to say, I would not accept no for an answer and I would not say no to an assignment within reasonable parameters. Having one-on-one conversations to find common ground is also very helpful.

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

A: Sometimes I have to speak a little louder than others and repeat myself. It is worth the effort.

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

A: Having graduated from law school 37 years ago, there have been an untold number of times when I have encountered sexism, including a male (married) in-house counsel telling me I had not been "nice" to him when I approached him about a business opportunity and would therefore not get the business. To add insult to injury, one of my male partners told me I should be flattered by the interest paid to me by the in-house counsel. I cannot publicly repeat the comments made to my partner, but to the in-house counsel, I simply said I was disappointed that I would not be doing any work for his company.

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

A: She has entered one of the best professions and there is a place for her at the table. She should do what is comfortable for her and work hard to get it. I would also advise her to not concentrate on the

notion of “having it all.” She should always maintain the understanding that things are not always fair and that sometimes her efforts to reach her goal may have to be greater than her male peers, but that she should remain undaunted. Where she sees an injustice, point it out, but be judicious. Every fight is not worth fighting.

It is very important to have internal and external mentors and it does not have to be a “formal” relationship and the mentor can be a peer or a man. In developing mentoring relationships, understand that the relationship is a two way street; it is important to be a good mentee. Within your firm, find a good sponsor. When someone has told you, you have done a great job on an assignment, challenge them. Ask what made it great and how it could have been better.

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

A: Women will choose firms based upon the opportunities they believe are available to them. A law firm must ensure that it is flexible in its relationships with females, with the understanding of the expense of losing valuable and talented females because they may not be able to give 100 percent of their time, all of the time. Firms must also ensure that there is a critical mass of women in key leadership/true decision-making roles in the firm so that associates and laterals know that they have something to which they can aspire. Firms must listen. I find it reassuring that I can pick up the phone at any time to discuss critical issues with my chairman and, more importantly, there is an honest exchange.

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

A: Arthenia Joyner (a member of the Florida state senate and past president of the National Bar Association). I admire her because she is not only an excellent attorney, but takes a stand on issues for which she believes. She does not compromise her principles and as result, she has not known wealth that someone of her caliber would have otherwise achieved. She is committed to public service and to helping women. She is one of the most selfless people I know.

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