

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Robins Kaplan's Tara Sutton

Law360, New York (March 05, 2014, 3:46 PM ET) -- Tara D. Sutton is a partner in Robins Kaplan Miller & Ciresi LLP's Minneapolis office and leads the firm's mass tort practice group. She has a trial practice focusing on representing individuals who have been injured by drugs and medical devices. She serves in plaintiffs' leadership in a variety of multidistrict and multijurisdictional products liability cases. She has been trial counsel in several bellwether MDL trials and has participated in obtaining multimillion-dollar verdicts and settlements on behalf of the firm's clients. Earlier in her career, Sutton represented corporations in patent infringement disputes, mainly in the area of medical device technology.



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She serves on nonprofit boards, including the Minneapolis Children's Theatre and is currently the secretary of the Public Justice Foundation, a public interest law firm dedicated to access to justice and individual consumer rights. She also serves as pro bono counsel to Minneapolis Swims, a nonprofit bringing swimming to inner-city Minneapolis children.

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

A: I really didn't think about it that way when I began my legal career at Robins (more than 20 years ago!). I used the same approach that had always been successful for me: work very hard, pay attention to detail, and don't be afraid of taking risks.

I was also very fortunate to join a litigation department chaired by the first female lawyer hired — and made a partner — at the law firm. She was very protective of the younger women in her department and, from the start, assigned me to high-profile litigation teams that included strong women leaders. They were great role models and extremely fair-minded. They rewarded hard work with more meaty assignments and weren't afraid to elevate my role on the case, even above more senior attorneys. Getting off to a strong start was crucial in my development and growth in the firm and as a lawyer. Reputation builds on itself — leading to more opportunities, respect and, ultimately, leadership positions in the firm and on cases.

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 of being at a senior level at a law firm are basically the same whether you are a man or woman. It is difficult enough to keep up with the day-to-day demands of a busy legal practice, much less find adequate time to develop practice areas or motivate others around you. Keeping all the balls in the air is always a challenge, no matter your gender, at this level.

For women leaders, in particular, it is important to not only open doors for other women but also to lead on matters that are totally unrelated to the fact that you are a woman. Excellence in your practice and client relationships will make your firm a great place to excel for women and men.

Finally, not to sound like a broken record, but work-life challenges are always present. But I think that, too, gets better over time. When I was a young partner with small children, traveling or being away from home for long trials, was very challenging. Also, because I was building my practice, I didn't want to say no to any new assignment. As I have gotten more senior, I find I have more ability (and confidence) to control my schedule, to speak up and say "let's pick a different day" for that meeting or deposition. And that has been an empowering experience.

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

A: I haven't experienced that many overtly sexist comments during my career, but I certainly have noticed questionable behavior. One common occurrence — which probably happens to a lot of women attorneys — is when opposing counsel assumes that I am not the one in charge and directs all their discussion at my male colleagues. A corollary is when opposing counsel declares me too pushy or bossy and wants only to negotiate with the more "reasonable" male on our team.

These tactics can drive me crazy, but it's important not to let it distract you from the end game: winning. Also, it's important to work with male colleagues that will call out opposing counsel for this behavior and support your authority in the case.

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

A: Work hard. Do excellent work. And don't expect that you will do everything well right away. Focus on becoming an accomplished lawyer and advancement in your firm will happen naturally. But also remember that becoming a good lawyer takes a lot of time and dedication. That means be self-confident but not arrogant. Work cooperatively with every member of your team. Be open to criticism and suggestion because that will lead to professional growth.

Also, observe closely other successful lawyers, whether male or female, and learn from them. They know what they are doing! Seek out opportunities to work with the leaders in your firm and don't be afraid to take on new challenges outside your comfort zone. Finally, make sure your voice is heard. Speak up at meetings. Don't let your contributions be ignored by more senior or vocal attorneys on the team.

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

A: Law firms need to empower young women with opportunities to succeed in their practice. That means providing women with substantive and out front roles on significant cases or with important clients. Women need to see a path to success. Thus, law firms need to address attrition and try and make the law firm a place where women see themselves not only advancing to partnership but becoming a leader in the firm's future. Also, law firms need to remember that real talent comes in all shapes and sizes, and partnership criteria must be flexible enough to ensure that capable and committed attorneys, performing high level work, are rewarded with advancement.

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

A: This is a tough question as many of the lawyers I admire greatly are the lawyers at my firm that have mentored me and fostered my practice. One person that particularly stands out is the Honorable Susan Richard Nelson. She was a partner at my firm for many years, representing severely injured individuals. She became an important mentor when we worked together later, when I was still an associate, on a large and highly stressful case. She practiced with grace but steely resolve. I greatly admired her ability to balance both the law and a busy family, never letting anyone down. It was no surprise to me that her talents and compassion were recognized by others outside the firm and that she was appointed a United States magistrate judge and then a federal district court judge for the District of Minnesota, where she serves today.

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