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TOP

## Women Lawyers *Addendum*

2024

# Learn to pivot



SHUTTERSTOCK

*Women have made significant contributions to the legal profession, bringing new skills, perspectives, and insights into the board room, conference room, and courtroom. However, women in the legal profession often have to balance their demanding careers with their family responsibilities, which can be challenging.*

By **Lori Dobrin**

Over the past few decades, women have profoundly and irrevocably changed the legal profession. They have brought new skills, perspectives and insights into the board room, the conference room, and the courtroom. They have instilled a sense of fairness and empathy

into an often callous and unsympathetic process.

And the legal profession has had a profound impact on the women in its ranks. It has demanded of them the same long hours and unwavering focus that are expected of men. And why shouldn't it? If women want to be treated as equals in a demanding profession, they should be willing to walk the walk.

But things are not really equal in the real world. Women bear and raise children, they maintain marriages, households and oversee family operations. A woman takes on the role of team mom and head room parent while sitting first chair at trial, all the while endlessly questioning her priorities as she dons these multiple hats. As children leave the nest, there is more

time to devote to lawyering but now, as part of the sandwich generation, she must make caring for elderly parents a priority as well.

### **Pandemic silver lining**

This is where I found myself as the COVID-19 pandemic began and progressed. I had been an appearance attorney for more than 20 years, and now the courts were

shut down. Just when I thought I had forgotten what it was like to sit down to dinners with my husband and two children, they were riding out the office shutdowns back at home via Zoom. Like so many of my female colleagues, I went from holding a briefcase to wielding a spatula; the biggest strategic decisions I had to make were what everyone wanted for their next meal.

When the courts finally reopened, there was a huge backlog of cases. In the interest of minimizing court congestion, the presiding judge enlisted members of the local legal community who had temporary bench officer experience to facilitate mandatory settlement conferences. I volunteered in this effort, and my world completely changed.

As so many of my peers have done, I found a new role for myself as a mediator. More than that, I discovered that I loved being a mediator. I learned that mediating came naturally to me – an epiphany that was the silver lining to my COVID-19 cloud.

When they agree to take on the mediator role, lawyers must quickly learn the ins and outs of Zoom, meeting with parties and navigating with dexterity, the art of shuttle diplomacy in breakout rooms. A dispute resolution course, such as that offered through Pepperdine University, can be transformative.

### **Switching gears**

The lesson from the pandemic is that women can, in fact, have it all. We can be skillful attorneys who negotiate contracts and argue in front of juries. We can go toe-to-toe with the toughest of our male colleagues and achieve multimillion-dollar verdicts. We can burn the midnight oil and establish new case precedents. But we don't have to.

For women, such as myself, who have achieved a certain age of ripeness and have done some or all of those things, there can be a next chapter. For me, that next story was all about helping disputing parties reach across the divide and find common ground to settle their differences. For others it may be mentoring or counseling or doing pro bono work. It might involve working with a not-for-profit or serving in a volunteer capacity for the public good.

### **Soft skills**

Whatever they end up doing, women who have practiced law bring to the table rich and unique life experiences that are unequaled among their male peers. They have given birth, raised children, grown gardens, fed youth sports teams from T-ball to tennis and managed households. They have nursed ailing loved ones and brokered disputes between parents, siblings and offspring.

Women have life experiences that shape and color how they see and treat others, as well as how they work within the legal system. Those experiences don't go away when they stop practicing law. In fact, those skills are exactly the reason why the second chapter for many women attorneys can be just as – or even more – fulfilling (equivalent to successful) as their first chapter.

When women mediate disputes, parties share their confidences and their innermost feelings with them, trusting that they will be listened to without judgment. As a mother, I know that my own children helped me develop this forte. Women generally are seen as possessing “soft skills” such as empathy and open-mindedness that build trust and rapport. Being married and navigating multi-generational family dynamics prime them for roles as problem solvers and peace-makers.

For women attorneys who have reached that golden age but may still balk at the idea of shifting into a slower lane on the legal turnpike, I have good news: You don't have much to learn. You just need to rediscover and flex different muscles – muscles you already possess and used on a regular basis many years ago. If you were once able to make your children's boo-boos

go away, you will have no problem helping warring parties reach middle ground or finding other ways to better your world.

Now may be the perfect time to pivot.

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*Lori Dobrin is a 39-plus year litigator who presently serves as a mediator with Alternative Resolution Centers handling civil disputes including personal injury, products and premises liability, real estate, landlord/tenant disputes, unlawful detainer, business, insurance subrogation, and medical malpractice. She also serves as a mediator and settlement officer for various courts, including the U.S. District Court and the Superior Courts of Los Angeles, Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties.*

