

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Anderson Kill's Rhonda Orin

Law360, New York (January 15, 2014, 1:42 PM ET) -- Rhonda D. Orin is the managing partner of the firm's Washington, D.C. office and the leader of the firm's health reform task force. She has experience in recovering insurance proceeds for policyholders across the country. Her achievements include one of the top 10 jury verdicts in the United States in 2003, precedent-setting state supreme court decisions across the country, multiple summary judgment rulings in favor of coverage and a landmark jury verdict in 2005 on behalf of a self-funded health plan. Her caseload typically ranges from multimillion-dollar environmental disputes to products liability coverage cases, including asbestos bankruptcies. She also represents employers with self-funded and fully insured health plans, especially as to their evolving obligations due to health reform.

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

A: I made a choice early in my career to develop a legal specialty, concentrate on business generation and commit to a small law firm. This path enabled me to put my professional energy to its best use: the constant development of substantive and practical skills. I was not distracted by internal firm politics, which is not a productive use of professional time. The law firm titles and the leadership positions then flowed from the successful development of my own career, which seems to be the right order.

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

A: When my children were young, the challenge was the endless juggling act. Living close to my office was very helpful, as was a natural tolerance for very long days. That time pressure became less of an issue as my children grew. At the senior level, it's hard to think of a challenge that is specific to being a woman. Male or female, it's pretty nice to be a senior lawyer — you have the substantive knowledge and practical experience to give the right advice quickly and with confidence.

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

A: When I was a junior partner, I asked a young male associate to assist me on a case pending in Mississippi. Shortly thereafter, I began to have trouble with local counsel — they missed internal deadlines, did not return phone calls and so on. I scheduled a meeting with them to discuss the situation and they were insistent about having the associate attend. Only then did I realize that they assumed the associate was the lead partner and that I was an upstart associate who didn't know her place. The problem was resolved quickly with a clear conversation about who was who.

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

A: I would advise any attorney, male or female, to concentrate early on developing an area of specialization and an independent, portable client base. Specific to women, if you have primary responsibility for young children, remember that the years of juggling are finite — even though particular days may seem like they will never end.

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

A: I have a clear answer here: Working women typically need flexibility in hours, a reduced monthly minimum and permission to work from home unexpectedly due to illnesses of their children, school closings and other things. If you give them this slack when they need it, they will remember later and reward you.

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

A: Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, because she bucked all conventions for women in the 1950s and 1960s, is well respected by her peers for her intellect and analysis, is passionate about interests outside of law, and reportedly maintains a close friendship with Justice Antonin Scalia despite having opposite viewpoints on most issues.

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