

LAW 360's

Female Powerbrokers Q&A:

Morrison Cohen's Danielle Lesser

Law360, New York (December 11, 2013, 1:09 PM ET) -- **Danielle C. Lesser** is a partner in Morrison Cohen LLP's New York office and co-chairwoman of the firm's business litigation department. Her practice includes both litigating and counseling her clients with respect to litigation risk and litigation avoidance strategies. Her clients include public companies, multimillion-dollar private companies, hedge funds, private equity funds, investment bankers, start-ups, developers, real estate companies, information and technology companies, high-net-worth individuals and partnerships in all types of business disputes.

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

A: It never occurred to me that the bar was an "old boys' network," and as a lawyer I have never been bothered by whether I was the only woman or one of the few women in the room. When I became a partner, there were only a few women partners in the ranks of the New York law firms. But I never viewed myself any differently from any other attorney at my firm and, more importantly, I was never treated any differently by any other attorney at my firm.

At Morrison Cohen, our practice focuses on providing senior-level attention to our clients, which are very successful financial institutions, corporations, entrepreneurs and early- and growth-stage companies, usually in the middle market. Our firm culture is unique in many respects, but we are justifiably proud of our commitment to being a meritocracy. I think that's the best sort of workplace we can provide for both female and male lawyers. I have never found our clients to be particularly concerned about who was providing the advice, so long as it was sound, strategic and commercial.

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

A: I strive to balance my career with my family life, which can be difficult. Also, as a senior attorney who is a woman, I want to make sure that our female associates get the best training and support possible, and benefit from having their careers nurtured and cultivated. I believe, however, that the challenges of being a senior-level partner at Morrison Cohen are not unique to me as a woman. Being a senior lawyer at a law firm with our business model means that I have to balance a busy legal practice, which includes management duties, with being exceptionally available to my clients whenever they may need me.

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

A: Early in my career, I successfully represented a client in restraining a merger transaction. When the trial court handed down its decision, the general counsel of the adverse party walked up to me and called me a "bitch." I thanked him for the compliment. Although I have never crossed paths with that general counsel again, I am certain he would never have reacted that way had I not been a young woman attorney.

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

A: My advice to an aspiring female attorney is never to think of herself as a female attorney. She should think of herself as an attorney, first and foremost, who is committed to providing the most compelling legal advice she can to her clients. She should strive to be judged by the quality of her skills and not by her gender.

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

A: Law firms should be flexible in terms of where their associates bill their hours. Although presence in an office is very important to firm culture and to promoting debate, collaboration and discussion, in my experience lawyers who work from home work effectively and efficiently and do not abuse the privilege of working outside the office. At Morrison Cohen, hours are of course important in working toward partnership. However, strong legal skills, attention to detail and solid and reliable legal analysis are the priorities. We offer our lawyers practical flexibility, and that attracts highly motivated lawyers, both men and women, and helps them achieve balance between their careers and their families.

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

A: I greatly admire Nancy Chemtob, who is the founding partner of Chemtob Moss & Forman LLP. Nancy is a skilled attorney, business generator and manager, as well as a great mom to her three sons. She combines hard work with humor and achieves great results for her clients. She has found a balance in her life that is enviable and inspiring.

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