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Big Law Rarity Koopersmith Sees More Women Leaders (Corrected)

Six years in as chair of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, Kim Koopersmith still finds it “a little maddening” when people are surprised that a woman runs a large law firm.

Koopersmith’s still a rarity in the upper reaches of the Big Law boys club but she sees more change coming, and views her experience and her management style at a 1,000-lawyer firm generating more than \$1 billion in annual revenues as a possible template for future industry leaders.

“I don’t think there are that many chairs and managing partners of law firms who made their mark by how associates and counsel and young partners were cultivated and trained and developed. I think that gave me an advantage at the firm,” she told Bloomberg Law in an interview at Akin Gump’s sleek new glass Washington offices.

“You could learn all the financial skills, but by building the relationships I was able to understand how important people’s sense of investment is in their career. That’s hard to learn.”

Koopersmith was recently tapped for her third term. Along with Jami McKeon, at Morgan Lewis & Bockius, and Faiza Saeed, at Cravath Swaine & Moore, she’s among the few women leading top-earning firms.

While a large segment of Big Law has never had a woman at the highest level, the industry may be ripe for greater transition with more firms facing lawsuits challenging pay and promotion inequalities. Koopersmith sees likely shifts further toward the type of systematic leadership development she experienced.

CEO Model In contrast to a number of law firms, previous Akin Gump chair Bruce McLean took a corporate approach to developing leadership. With Koopersmith, he moved her through career-building assignments while she worked as a successful litigator.

Like many female corporate CEOs whose advancement was built on human resources experience, Koopersmith for years was the partner in charge of professional development and recruiting at the firm. Akin Gump has a giant Washington lobbying contingent and signature practices in trade, financial restructuring, corporate, energy, regulation, litigation and white-collar investigations.

In her previous positions, she helped shape the firm that was founded 74 years ago by legendary power broker Robert S. Strauss, and whose roster includes senior counsel and former White House adviser Vernon Jor-

dan, former Indiana Democratic Sen. Joe Donnelly and former Crowell & Moring chair Angela B. Styles.

Patricia Gillette, a former Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe partner who studies and speaks on workplace diversity and equality, also said that more firms will need a corporate leadership development approach.

“Law firms need to adopt some of the ways corporations confront institutional barriers facing women and minorities, including the pay gap, lack of opportunities and implicit bias,” Gillette said.

“For example, making sure training programs have an impact and there is monitoring of assignments. Law firms say a lot of things, but it’s what they do that counts,” she said.

Working Women Koopersmith cut her teeth on a sensitive workplace issue as soon as she joined Akin Gump in 1994 and found there was no reduced hours policy.

As a mother of two young children, she had been working a four-day week at her previous firm, Anderson Kill. She soon set about devising a reduced workload policy for Akin Gump. Convincing the management committee—which was then all, or mostly all, male—was daunting.

“To be in the room was a little bit overwhelming,” she said.

But the policy was approved to allow working women lawyers to remain on the partnership track while working a non-traditional schedule.

“Kim led the effort that looked into all those involved, including practice leaders, associates and partners. And she did a terrific job,” recalled McLean, who is retired.

After that she took on other tasks “and displayed sensitivity to competing interests,” he added.

When Koopersmith was up for chair, McLean said, “there was virtually no resistance.”

Creating Boundaries Koopersmith credits McLean with mentoring that made her feel “consistently supported,” and has steered the firm’s culture to be more inclusive for minorities and women.

Koopersmith has worked hard to diversify Akin Gump’s ranks, retain more women attorneys, and to create pro bono and other opportunities for the firm’s employees.

With Washington and New York offices headed by black lawyers, and Houston led by a woman, Koopersmith said, “You can look around and see yourself in a leadership role in the firm.”

To encourage women associates to remain engaged, she pays attention to the work assigned.

“I’m very focused on how are women receiving assignments. Are they feeling they are so invested that the

calculation of whether I want to stay here weights towards 'I love this?' " she said.

While working in Big Law means major time commitment, Koopersmith encourages creating boundaries. When she received a call during a dinner recently with her father, she thought, "I could say yes, but my father is 88 and I'd rather stick with this. I'll do the call tomorrow."

She recently put into effect a policy to allow rotation for short stints to other firm offices to help build camaraderie at the firm, which last year slipped a notch on the AmLaw gross revenue rankings, to No. 30, even as it garnered record revenues for six straight years. The outflow was due to investments in its technology infrastructure and its two new offices, including one in Dallas.

The idea for office rotations came from a hackathon for fourth-year associates, who also proposed 10 weeks of leave for all parents, which Koopersmith promptly adopted.

She has also invested the firm in pro bono work, with 100,000 hours devoted firm-wide last year both in the U.S. and abroad, including training judges in other countries. Pro bono has been a major calling card for Akin Gump's recruiting efforts. The firm is on its 12th class of pro bono scholars, law students who spend part of their summers working at public interest organizations through Akin Gump.

"There are lots of good ideas out there," Koopersmith said. "My job is not to think up those ideas as much as it is to recognize good ones and put them into effect."

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