

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Akin Gump's Christine LaFollette

Law360, New York (January 06, 2014, 1:17 PM ET) -- Christine B. LaFollette is the partner in charge of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP's Houston office and a member of the firm's management committee. She has more than 30 years of experience representing energy companies, which include those focused on exploration and production as well as transportation and oilfield service and master limited partnerships. Her practice covers mergers, acquisitions and divestitures, issuers and underwriters in public offerings and private placements of equity and debt securities, and boards and management in complex securities law and corporate governance matters.

She also serves as a director of the Houston World Affairs Council and as a director for the National Association of Corporate Directors — Houston Chapter and the Texas General Counsel Forum. She is also a fellow of the Texas Bar Foundation, a former director of the Houston Bar Foundation and a member of the College of the State Bar of Texas. The M&A Advisor named her “Female Dealmaker of the Year” in 2010.

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

A: I worked hard and had a lot of patience! Those “old boys” needed time to realize that we girls could — and should — be on the same team solving problems together. I don’t think it was an intentional effort to be noninclusive, just a transition that needed to be understood to be appreciated. I work in the energy industry, which is defined by hard work and getting back up whenever the world (or the price of oil) knocks you down. Wearing a hard hat on a simulated rig blowout training program taught me respect for the importance of the efforts of everyone on a team.

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

A: I actually think the toughest challenges for a woman within a law firm are those that a junior lawyer has to face. Early in one’s career, finding the right mentor and support system to develop your professional career at the same time that you’re juggling the rest of your life can be difficult. With years of trial and error has come more of an ability to focus my time and balance the many pulls. I find technology has allowed me to be more organized and to multitask and adapt to the 24/7 needs of clients. Of course, for women and men at senior levels comes the responsibility not only for your clients but also every other person at your law firm.

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

A: Actually, I look back and still laugh at the time I was asked by a male opposing counsel to “fetch” him a cup of coffee. Of course, in my navy blue suit, I graciously obliged. Needless to say, when we went into negotiations and I sat down across the table, he was quite surprised. I had the advantage the rest of the meeting. At least the days of navy suits, pumps and bow ties are done, so I don’t get asked for directions at an airport anymore.

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

A: Congratulations. You are entering the practice of law at a great time! You have so many different options to pursue. Not only has technology opened up the world, it has also provided many tools for communicating and documenting exciting transactions as well as creatively solving problems. So, focus on your goals and work hard.

Find a mentor, male or female. You need someone to ask questions, vent with and just give you perspective. I have to remind myself: Is someone dying or going to jail? If not, then we have time to fix the problem.

Also, start developing relationships with your peers in a transaction. They will grow with you and not only someday may become a client but, more importantly, a friend. I think a female attorney can find this to be a wonderful profession — just remember to laugh at least once each day.

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 be attuned to the flexibility that empowers women as they work their way up the long career path to partner. Starting with a philosophy of teamwork and commitment is critical. The clients are diverse, and they want their lawyers to be also. As more women break the glass ceiling, and organizations embrace flexibility, women are commanding more leadership space not only in law firms but also in the C-suite. Including women on the client team from day one helps.

Programs that allow alternative work schedules and provide the technology to work from home help attorneys find their own work-family balance.

It is helpful to have initiatives to support women in networking with clients and their colleagues. Leadership skills can be developed in the law firm that will result in benefits not only from the diverse perspectives presented but also from the cohesion it builds between individuals and the firm. Women don't want special favors; we just want a fair chance.

I am pleased to say that, at Akin Gump, we do more than simply pay lip service to the importance of nurturing female partners through our ranks. In addition to having women leaders throughout the firm, in April of this year, Kim Koopersmith, a terrific attorney and leader, assumed the role of Akin Gump chairperson — the first woman to hold that position in our firm's history and one of very few at any large, global firm. Throughout her career, Kim has been a champion of ensuring that women have ample opportunities to advance and succeed in "big law," and her rise to the role of chair is proof that, with the right culture and tools in place, that goal is achievable.

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

A: A real "shero" is Anne Chandler. She is the director of Tahirih Justice Center's Houston office. As a cum laude graduate of the University of Houston Law Center, she received a Distinguished Service Award, won the Joan Glantz Garfinkel Scholarship for civil liberties research and served as president of the Public Interest Law Organization, which focuses on providing services to immigrant children detained in south Texas.

But all those awards only paint part of the picture. Anne is a hardworking, optimistic lawyer passionate about helping immigrant women and children who seek justice in the United States and freedom from gender-based violence. Despite long days of work, she always has a smile to reach inside the aching heart of a worried young woman and encourage her. Anne is relentless in her efforts to make a difference. If we all had Anne's intensity and dedication, there could be world peace.

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