

A Personal Business Plan That Fits Within the Organization

► **Akin Gump's Courtney York discusses her approach to leadership and career development.**

CCBJ: You recently joined Akin Gump after a long tenure at Baker Botts. What spurred the move?

Courtney York: I started my career at Baker Botts, which is primarily an energy firm. My career had evolved to a point where I really needed to be at a firm with the requisite building blocks for a strong technology, media and telecom (TMT) practice. Akin turned out to be a perfect fit. I've been at Akin for over six months, and it is a very collaborative, positive and energetic environment. That has made my transition easy.

I have been practicing law for more than 16 years. I have a strong background as a corporate generalist, with experience in M&A, securities, spin-offs and corporate governance, but at this point in my career, my practice is focused primarily on M&A and related transactional work for clients in the TMT industry. Over the years, I've been fortunate to have worked with clients ranging from some of the largest companies in the TMT industry to startups and emerging-growth companies.

I love M&A work and the TMT industry. It's exciting to be a part of such a dynamic industry and to work with clients as they grow their businesses and as their businesses evolve. I enjoy being a trusted problem solver for my clients. I find it very rewarding when a deal closes – it's the culmination of a lot of hard work, and that brings a sense of accomplishment. And each transaction has its own twists and challenges. It's part of what keeps my practice interesting, and I really enjoy the creative aspect of transactional work.

What about the challenges you've encountered along the way?

One of the biggest challenges that I've seen in the past is that women didn't work together

and support each other often enough. From my perspective, the female role models that I saw as an associate were few and far between, and many of the ones that were there had the attitude of "I had to navigate these challenges on my own, so you should, too." But I don't want to be discouraging, because I think that's really changing. I know many like-minded women who, instead of sticking their elbows out to defend their territory as the one token female in the room, are instead now looking around to see how they can help other women advance and grow professionally.

I personally have benefited from the support of other women, and particularly women who are in-house. I know that I and many other women take time to mentor young lawyers, and I view that as an important part of my job as a partner at Akin. And client commitment to diversity is incredibly important. I've seen this commitment expand in many respects over the past few years. I think it's a very positive sign, and it has the ability to change the landscape for women and diverse lawyers.

Tell us a little bit about your leadership style.

I would describe myself as a consensus builder. I like to have input from as many different people as possible when making decisions. I think you learn a lot by taking that approach, and, in my view, people only really respect leadership when they feel that their voice is being heard. Even if you make a decision with which others disagree, people value being part of the process.

How do you see your role when you're working with clients?

My role can vary depending on the client relationship and the situation. In my practice, there's often not a simple right or wrong legal answer. Instead, clients are assessing risks and deciding how to proceed based on their understanding of those risks. I view part of my role as helping my clients think through



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the risks and benefits of a particular action so that they can make sound business decisions. But I think it's also important to add value by bringing my expertise and judgment to the conversation. As I mentioned before, I like being a problem solver for my clients. I enjoy taking a complicated set of circumstances and working with clients to help them determine the best way to achieve their goals. On a macro level, that could be figuring out the best way to structure the purchase or sale of a business, or it could be coming up with a creative way to resolve a discreet issue so that we can close a transaction.

What's your advice for others looking to grow within their firm or law department?

Be proactive. That sounds like two very simple words, but it covers a lot of ground. If you're in a large firm or legal department, it can be easy to feel like others will guide you to the career path that's going to be best for you. But in my experience, that's not always the case. I think lawyers need

to ensure that they have a personal business plan, that they understand how that plan fits in with the larger organization and that they're taking steps to make sure they achieve their goals. Putting something down on paper can be a difficult first step to take, but it's much easier to get to your destination if you have a map.

For associates, being proactive could mean actively thinking about and seeking out the types of work that they want to do. For women especially, it can mean making sure that you are getting credit for the work that you do, although I recognize that is easier said than done and that it isn't possible under all circumstances. But lawyers need to make sure that others in their organization, particularly the decision makers, know what they are contributing to the work that's being done for clients. That is very important to career advancement.

Partners and more senior attorneys can also be proactive by taking the time to look around to see how they can support and help others grow their practices – and help them to advance professionally. ■