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In Their Words: Women Leaders On Top Advice To Associates

By Tracey Read

Law360 (March 26, 2025, 12:00 PM EDT) -- Much progress has been made for female lawyers since Congress first designated March as Women's History Month in 1987.

Women in 2024 represented 51.6% of associates at law firms and more than 55% of summer associates, according to a 2025 National Association for Law Placement report. And in 2021, the legal industry saw a major wave of first-time women leaders, with nearly two dozen named as managing partner or co-managing partner at BigLaw, midsize and regional firms.

Women have continued rising to leadership roles. Earlier this month, Norton Rose Fulbright named Gina Shishima, an Austin, Texas-based intellectual property partner, as vice chair of the firm's U.S. management committee. And in January, Snell & Wilmer LLP tapped Courtney Henson as its first female managing partner in Tucson, Arizona.

However, there are still roads to be paved for women up the leadership ladder. Only 28.8% of partners were women in 2024, according to the 2025 NALP report.

Law360 Pulse compiled this list of pointers for young female attorneys who want to move up in the ranks from five women with leadership roles at five law firms, in their own words. Their comments have been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Sandi Krul

Partner, Hooper Lundy & Bookman PC; co-chair, Health Equity Task Force; member, board of directors

Don't let fear get in your way! Studies seem to show that women may be more hesitant to put their hat in the ring or take on higher positions — even when offered the opportunity. To be candid, I have been guilty of that in the past, as well. But we need more women to step into those roles — not just to serve as role models for the women more junior to us, but also to ensure that we have a critical mass of women in higher positions to counter those feelings of not belonging and show younger female associates that it is possible to have both a family and a successful legal career. You don't need to completely step out of the ring, but make sure you are with a firm or company that supports flexibility.

It always amazes me that, when I was born, women made up only about 20% of law school classes. Oh, and this was also a time when banks could refuse to issue a credit card to an unmarried woman and could require a married woman to have her husband cosign — but I digress!

So, it's no wonder there were so few women partners in leadership when I was an associate. Fast-forward, my understanding is that women have outnumbered men in law school classrooms across the United States for the past decade. The pipeline is now there, and we need to make sure this momentum continues.

Kellie Lerner Managing partner, Shinder Cantor Lerner LLP

Although it happens less frequently after almost 25 years of practice, I often noticed others underestimate my talent. This phenomenon is not limited to the law, and I have heard similar frustrations voiced by women across a variety of traditionally male-dominated fields. Over time, I have developed strategies to use this misperception to my benefit. Looking back, I think I embraced the "Let Them Theory" long before Mel Robbins spun it into a bestselling book.

Women lawyers are entering the profession with depth in business and technology that gives them a decisive edge. My only advice is to make sure that we older lawyers do not get in the way of forging their own path and making their mark during this watershed moment in the practice of law.

I really appreciate this annual moment to pause and reflect on whether we are doing all we can to support one another. This is a great month to offer pro bono support to organizations such as Her Justice or to donate to organizations that are expanding opportunities for young girls, like one of my personal favorites, Girls Who Code.

Some inspirational women on my mind recently include Danielle Sassoon, acting Manhattan U.S. attorney and a Republican, who resigned after refusing to obey an order by the Justice Department to dismiss the pending indictment against Mayor Eric Adams. I have been thinking a lot about the recent passing of Shirah Neiman, who fought to become the first woman ever hired in the criminal division of the U.S. Attorneys' office for the Southern District of New York. And forever an inspiration, I think of Dovey Johnson Roundtree, the first lawyer to win a bus desegregation case before the [Interstate Commerce Commission]. When my practice feels challenging, I think of her successful defense of a Black man accused of murdering a Washington socialite before a white judge and jury at a time when she was not even allowed to use the courthouse cafeteria or restrooms. The common thread among all three women is their willingness to suffer through what was unpopular to do but what they each knew was right.

Maria Stout Partner and executive committee member, Knobbe Martens

Looking back, the roadblocks I faced were of my own making. These included doubts about whether I could win an election for a seat on our firm's executive committee — twice — and a reluctance to speak up with an opinion that I knew was not the majority view but was important to surface. I overcame those challenges by learning to be comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. When the voice in my head says, "Maybe this would be a good time to stay in your lane?" I remember that I represent partners who trusted my judgment enough to elevate me to this role. I've also learned from voices in the room that don't seem to be limited by any self-imposed "lanes." They remind me any lane can be my lane.

Don't wait for the "perfect" opportunity to take on a leadership role or to ask for that "first" position of responsibility. Perfect opportunities don't exist. I've found it's better to throw your hat in the ring for any opportunity that interests you, and — if no one picks it up — don't dwell on it for too long before finding the next ring.

Also, look up. Do you see women in the ranks above you that have careers and home lives that you

could see yourself having? Learning from and emulating those women will help you pick — and decline — opportunities and positions that make sense for you and your long-term goals.

Margo Wolf O'Donnell Co-chair, labor and employment practice and DEI committee, Benesch Friedlander Coplan & Aronoff LLP

I found a practice area, employment law, that enables me to provide value to my clients by helping them maintain productive and stable workplaces. Enjoying my work and being engaged with my practice and clients have enabled me to grow my practice and become a leader at my firm. If you find a practice area that you enjoy and a firm where you can thrive, success and leadership should follow.

For all associates, responsiveness is incredibly important. As an employment lawyer, it is especially important to be available to clients and be ready to respond to emergencies if they arise. The same goes for associates. Do not hesitate to be proactive and share your thoughts and ideas.

Chahira Solh Executive committee chair Crowell & Moring LLP; member, management board

I joined Crowell as a first-year associate, and one of my first mentoring lessons was the importance of developing relationships. So, I worked hard to develop internal relationships, allowing me opportunities to grow as a lawyer and as a leader. I used every interaction, whether with clients or my colleagues, to learn how to do better. Through my many relationships, I was able to demonstrate leadership, and was considered for various leadership positions.

With each of my opportunities to lead, I felt a bit of "impostor syndrome" as to whether I truly belonged in a particular leadership position. With the support of my mentors and sponsors, I overcame that feeling — I knew they would provide me with constructive feedback on the ways I could improve as a leader and would also support me in the various roles so that I could learn. That support made all the difference in my ability to continue to grow into bigger roles.

I would tell all junior associates that paying close attention to how certain individual interests intersect with the law can ignite a passion for this profession and provide a great focus for someone building a career in the legal field. Learning how to be an excellent advocate for your clients is the foundation of success and will open opportunities for mentorship, sponsorship and leadership within any organization. And taking advantage of those opportunities as they arise will naturally provide a path of impact — for your clients, your practice, your colleagues, and for your communities. I would also say to seek opportunities both within your firm and beyond. Leveraging your legal talent in ways to help your community can provide invaluable experience in both the law and in leadership.

This month often reminds me of the famous Ruth Bader Ginsburg quote: "I tell law students ... if you are going to be a lawyer and just practice your profession, you have a skill — very much like a plumber. But if you want to be a true professional, you will do something outside yourself ... something that makes life a little better for people less fortunate than you."

--Additional reporting by Emma Cueto, Madison Arnold and Frank G. Runyeon. Editing by Amy French.