

## Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Crowell's Ellen Dwyer

*Law360, New York (February 07, 2014, 12:54 PM ET)* -- Ellen M. Dwyer is the managing partner of Crowell & Moring LLP. As managing partner and a member of the firm's executive committee, she is responsible for the overall operation of the firm's U.S. and foreign offices and, together with the firm's senior leadership team, setting the firm's strategy and direction.

Dwyer maintains an active labor and employment practice representing employers in the full array of labor and employment matters, including class action and individual claims filed under federal and state anti-discrimination and related employment laws. She is a fellow of the American Bar Association and a director of Focus on the Children, a nonprofit organization serving the needs of impoverished children.

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

A: I have not experienced an old boy's network at my law firm, though I have certainly found one at the managing partner level of AmLaw 100 firms. While there are now several women serving as managing partners at the office level, there are many fewer leading at the firm level.

I can remember attending my first managing partner discussion group hosted by a local university and feeling both ignored and completely disconnected from the other leaders in the room. Many of the managing partners in attendance — who were nearly 15 years older than me — had known each other for years, having spoken on panels together, practiced law opposite each other, and attended what seemed like years of professional sports events together. They were also a loquacious group, which did not leave much opportunity for me either to be heard or known at the outset.

Undeterred, I began to express my thoughts about the challenges of leading our law firms, and the other leaders who did not know me well came to know me better. We listened to and learned from each other. Over time, we built relationships with each other, many of which I still enjoy today.

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

A. One of the challenges I face as a senior leader in my firm is building relationships with and remaining connected to all of my partners across the firm. I think it is essential that my partners — both men and women — feel that firm leaders know them, are working every day to create opportunities for them, and truly value them as people and contributors to our shared enterprise. That is enormously difficult to do, and exponentially more difficult to replicate those connections with our counsel and associates.

And as one of a relatively small number of senior women in the firm, more is expected of each of us. If you fail to attend a firm-sponsored event, the other lawyers in attendance often note your absence, or

the absence of senior women, in a way that is quite different from our male counterparts. Many of the expectations are, of course, self-imposed. I want to not only be viewed as a successful practitioner, but also as someone our more junior women lawyers can relate to, and maybe even gain confidence through my experience that they too can realize their ambitions at the firm.

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

A: The most recent time that I can recall occurred during an interview with an external candidate to the law firm. I was interviewing a senior person from Capitol Hill, with two of my male partners. I was the only firm leader in the room. When I asked the candidate a question, he responded to each of my partners. He did not make eye contact with me or otherwise acknowledge my presence in the room. I tried several times during the interview that day to connect with him, but I seemed to remain invisible to the candidate. My partners noticed the candidate's behavior and remarked about it after the interview. We were all quite incredulous about how stark the candidate's sexism appeared. It was not a successful recruiting outing for the candidate.

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

A: I would encourage her from the very beginning of her career to identify opportunities she would like to have, and to go after them. There is a good bit of research on gender issues that suggests that women tend to believe that they will be noticed and rewarded for simply staying in their offices and doing excellent work. The world doesn't work that way, at least not in my experience. I would urge a young woman attorney to of course do excellent work, but then to get out of her office, and to let the lawyers around her know what her ambition is, and her commitment to realizing it. She should throw her hat in the ring for opportunities, and worry about how she can manage it all after she gets the opportunity. She'll find a way to manage, and in the interim, she will grow tremendously as a lawyer and person.

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

A: I would urge the law firm's leaders to sponsor its women at all levels of the organization like crazy. We now have tremendous numbers of women coming out of law schools and into our firms. They are talented, ambitious, thoughtful and in search of senior people who will believe and invest in them. We need to take the time to get to know them — who they are as people, what they value, and who they want to be both personally and professionally. And then, we need to create opportunities for them to demonstrate their talent, provide them with relentless feedback, and make them better every day. We need to be transparent with them about the challenges of partnership, what they need to do achieve it, and then let them know that we believe in them, and will help them navigate the path to partnership.

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

A: I would have to say Attorney General Eric Holder. I had my first trial experience in front of then D.C. Superior Court Judge Holder in the early 1990s. We were handling a contested adoption case, in which we represented the foster mother of a young child who had been abandoned by her teenage mother and maternal grandparents.

In the middle of the trial, our client, an indigent, elderly African American woman suffered a stroke, and subsequently died. We had been passionate advocates for our client who had refused to let her foster child fail in a system known for neglect. Throughout the three-week trial, Judge Holder taught me a

tremendous amount about what it means to be an effective advocate for my client, and the power of pursuing a just cause.

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