

Female Powerbrokers: An Interview with Kaye Scholer's Rhonda Trotter

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According to a [2012 survey of leadership roles for women](#) among the AmLaw 100, women partners, on average, hold less than 17 percent of the positions on a law firm's top governing board or committee. The statistics aren't much better when it comes to women serving as heads of practice areas or as office managing partners, accounting for 20 percent and 15 percent respectfully. Partner Rhonda Trotter, who serves both as Office Managing Partner for Kaye Scholer's Los Angeles office and as Co-Leader of its Trademark, Copyright & False Advertising Practice, discusses how more women can assume a leadership role at law firms today.

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

A: First, I had to decide that I wanted to "be at the table." I have often been asked why I remained in a large law firm environment my entire legal career. In addition to all of the reasons typical of lawyers of all races and genders (cutting-edge legal work, outstanding resources, etc.), it was important for me as an African-American woman to prove to myself and others that I could succeed in what is a challenging environment.

Second, it goes almost without saying that I have striven throughout my career to provide top-quality service, both to my internal "clients" — the more senior lawyers with whom I worked — and to our external clients. This has meant very long hours at times, and a willingness to "get the job done" at nearly all costs.

Finally, but at least equally important for my career advancement, I have had outstanding mentorship and sponsorship, principally from male senior lawyers.

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

A: There are still too few women at a senior level in law firms and therefore few role models for younger attorneys looking to rise up through the ranks. The higher one rises in the law firm environment, the greater number of meetings there are in which one is the only woman present. In many respects, those of us in senior positions are still pioneers, even in the year 2014.

Another challenge is that of work-life balance. Women remain the primary caregivers in our society, whether of children or of aging parents, and those demands don't stop as we advance in our careers. And, while some may naively believe that once one makes partner one has captured the brass ring, the professional challenges in fact further intensify from there.

In addition to continuing to render the highest quality of legal service, there is the added pressure of developing and maintaining a solid client base. Indeed, the firm — and its associates and support staff — depends on us to deliver results in an area that many lawyers are uncomfortable with: marketing. The pressures are significant.

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

A: The most overt example of sexism I experienced occurred when I was a law student interviewing at a major firm for a summer associate position. During a callback interview with one of the senior partners, we got into a discussion regarding diversity in law firms. He told me point blank that the reason there were so few female partners at his firm (and others) was that women “want to have babies.” I happily turned down that firm's job offer.

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

A: Aspiring female attorneys must be strategic and vocal in seeking out opportunities for professional growth and advancement. Take control of your own career; you cannot wait for someone else to ensure that you get the right kinds of assignments. Even the most sympathetic senior partner can't track whether you are getting the right opportunities on a daily basis; we all have incredible demands for our time and attention, particularly in the increasingly competitive legal environment.

Be willing to stretch yourself and take risks; proactively seek out opportunities to do things you've never done before: whether it be taking depositions, playing an active role in negotiating a transaction or arguing a motion at an important court hearing. If things slow down in terms of your workload, look for seminars and other opportunities to learn substantive legal areas you are unfamiliar with. Most of all, avoid the temptation to just “keep your head down,” because if you don't, you'll suddenly look up to see a Mack truck bearing down on you.

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

A: Law firms must take a very proactive approach to the development of their women associates at the earliest stages in their careers. They also must be transparent — to all associates — about

how associates typically make it to the partnership ranks. Too often, associates, particularly female associates, do not understand the importance of sponsorship (as opposed to mentorship): the importance of finding a partner who will be an advocate for you during the review process each year and during elevation discussions.

Law firms should also make the flex-time and part-time path to partnership a reality instead of a laudable goal. This will require a significant shift away from the traditional “hours”-based path to elevation, where associates are evaluated primarily on the basis of annual billable hours as opposed to other harder-to-measure, but often far more important factors such as emotional intelligence, efficient use of time and strong relationship-building skills.

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

A: I most admire my mother, Katie Murff Trotter, who, after raising two children as a single parent and public school teacher, went to law school at night to fulfill her lifelong dream of becoming an attorney. She then developed a successful criminal defense practice by hanging up her own shingle after law school.

She is among the “deans” of the African-American female bar, and has served as a mentor and role model to many, including me. I believe I inherited my fierce cross-examination skills from her; I have been able to witness her nearly bring seasoned law enforcement officers to tears on the stand. At the age of 77, she still practices law full-time, principally defending death-penalty eligible murder cases. Indeed, just recently, she got a defense verdict in a double-homicide case. She remains one of my top “sheroes.”

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