

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Holwell Shuster's Dorit Black



Law360, New York (February 03, 2014, 1:59 PM ET) -- Dorit Ungar Black is a founding partner of Holwell Shuster & Goldberg LLP in New York. An international arbitration specialist, she has practiced in both civil and common law jurisdictions for the past 15 years, including courts in New York, New Jersey, Delaware and Pennsylvania. Her practice focuses on disputes regarding commercial contracts, complex financial instruments, business torts, commercial leases and international construction projects.

Prior to founding Holwell Shuster & Goldberg in 2012, Black was a partner in the New York office of Kasowitz Benson Torres & Friedman LLP, and before that she practiced at White & Case LLP in New York and Wolf Theiss & Partners in Vienna. A native German speaker, she holds law degrees from both Columbia University and the University of Vienna.

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

A: By not trying to be a man. Throughout my career I've noticed that too many of my female colleagues obsess over the perceived — and perhaps real — disadvantages of being a woman in a still male-dominated field. I tried not to let the fact that I was not part of the boys' club bother me. Instead, I simply lived — and continue to live — by the credo that as long as I was passionate about my cases, produced great results for my clients and got along with everyone on the team, from paralegal to senior partner, I would succeed.

I distinctly recall a client dinner many years ago when I was still an associate. One of the partners paid me a great compliment, stating that if he had to describe me in one word, it would be "kind." I've always tried to embrace the feminine attributes I bring to the table, such as kindness and sensitivity towards others, and believe that these attributes, among others, have propelled me to where I am in my career today.

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

A: Law firms frequently have an old boys' club mentality. Even in firms that do not, such as my own, it is easy for a female partner in a senior position to carry a chip on her shoulder, be haunted by self-doubt and ultimately not make her mark. I find it imperative that such a female attorney assert herself without being aggressive and command the respect of her partners, associates, and adversaries.

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

A: I am not sure I would describe it as sexism, but a client's general counsel, with whom I had worked for several years and who was 20 years my senior, once invited me to accompany him to a social event. It was obvious he was asking me out on a date, though he presented it as his way of expressing his gratitude for my hard work. The approach caught me off-guard, and I had to walk a fine line between preserving the client relationship and looking out for myself. I doubt male associates are frequently confronted with similar situations. I declined the invitation, explaining that while flattered, I was uncomfortable with it. The GC took it graciously and the issue was resolved.

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

A: I have seen some smart and capable female attorneys turn into their own worst enemies and torpedo their careers by being too defensive in reacting to criticism and being far too driven by competitiveness rather than camaraderie, particularly in dealing with their female colleagues. In my own experience, this tactic rarely succeeds and often backfires. My advice is to give due respect to everyone you work with, be a good team player, and earn respect by being a strong and confident attorney, never afraid to share your opinions.

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

A: Create a firm policy that makes it possible for female attorneys to combine work and family life. The simple reality is that far too many supremely capable women would choose family over law firm life if the two were incompatible. Some law firms, my own included, afford women the opportunity to satisfy their commitment to family. Not coincidentally, we find that these happier female attorneys blossom and produce better results for their firms and clients in the long run.

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

A: Though it may sound trite, my husband, Barry Black [of the Law Offices of Barry Black PC], springs to mind. As a criminal defense attorney he has represented a number of legal aliens, who, as a result of a criminal conviction, faced deportation to their country of origin. Many of these clients are decent, hard-working individuals who, as a result of adverse circumstances or unfortunate conditions, got themselves into trouble with the law. As the U.S. Supreme Court recognized in *Padilla v. Kentucky*, preserving these clients' right to remain in the United States may be far more important than any possible jail sentence.

In every single one of his representations in these "Padilla" cases, Barry has succeeded in getting prior convictions vacated and ultimately achieving resolutions that allowed his clients to remain in the United States. In part, his success can be attributed to the compassion and humanity with which he treats every one of his clients and which he injects into his negotiations with prosecutors and applications to courts. Remarkably, his clients often continue to express their gratitude years after the representation ends.

Throughout my career in big law, I have also found myself particularly intrigued by cases that have a human angle. I was privileged to work on several such matters at my previous firms, and I continue to have the opportunity to do so at Holwell Shuster & Goldberg.

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