

## Embracing Authenticity: A Better Way To Break the Glass Ceiling



**An insightful discussion on the importance of being true to yourself as an attorney. Being authentic "leads to stronger business relationships ... and overall better work product because you can focus your energy on the matter at hand rather than keeping up the exhausting task of conformity."**

**By Elina Alperovich | June 22, 2022 | New York Law Journal**

*"You don't golf? Good, me neither! But let's get to know each other on a personal level and find out what we have in common and connect in an authentic way."*

*—Victoria Portnoy, Managing Director, Blackstone*

As a young attorney, hearing stories of female Big Law partners proudly working on deals during active labor was fairly common—a shining example of the whatever-it-takes attitude that many firms and clients traditionally expected from their leaders. Short of being inspiring, these examples were more indicative of an environment that caused many women lawyers to rethink their career paths before they reached the upper echelons of the legal profession.

Today, even some of the most visible, high-level professional women have admitted that they were wrong to suggest that all women should "lean in" to their careers in order to succeed, but the traditional model persists. The legal blogosphere is replete with advice on how female attorneys can rise in their careers: be

assertive and advocate for yourself; network and be extroverted, and focus on face time and networking. For many, that could read as: “change your personality if you want to succeed.”

But I want to spotlight an alternative message for professional success in the legal world, said best by Victoria Portnoy, Managing Director at Blackstone: “You must be authentic. I don’t want a lawyer who is pretending to be something they’re not because that’s what they’ve been told is necessary for them to succeed.” In my experience, this approach leads to stronger business relationships and alignment with your clients, more engagement with your team, and overall better work product because you can focus your energy on the matter at hand rather than keeping up the exhausting task of conformity.

I have three overarching goals as a shareholder in Greenberg Traurig’s global corporate practice: (1) exceed my clients’ expectations and help them achieve their goals; (2) develop new and strengthen existing client relationships; and (3) be the best mentor and teacher to the next generation of lawyers I can be. I know that all three can be achieved without having to change who I am or sacrifice personal boundaries. As a matter of fact, “bringing your true self to work” is a core value at Greenberg Traurig and what inspired me to join the team.

In short, women do not need to contort themselves into cookie-cutter molds to become successful leaders; they need only be themselves. Forward-thinking companies capitalize on and enhance the unique strengths of their top performers, regardless of gender, which requires them to consciously adapt their talent assessment capabilities. Recognizing a young lawyer’s specific talents is an essential skill.

As a starting point, the following are five suggestions for how female lawyers can bring authenticity to the legal practice:

**1. Self-Reflection:** In the early stages of a legal career, it is easy to simply do work assignments and go through the motions. Without introspection, you avoid processing how that work fits with your skillset and what additional perspective and value you can bring to the matter. Identify your strengths and weaknesses, what values are important to you, and what motivates and energizes you. In essence, find your “why.”

**2. Establish Goals and Be Accountable:** Once identified, establish goals that capitalize on those strengths. By setting goals that you are passionate about, you are more motivated to achieve them. Review and reevaluate goals often, and finetune or modify goals that no longer serve you. To help achieve those goals, it is critical to have mentors and/or a community that will hold you accountable to them.

**3. Set Boundaries and Seek Help:** The flipside of setting goals is establishing your boundaries based on your values and weaknesses. Saying “no” and asking for help takes courage and it is essential to learn the appropriate times to do so. Part of setting boundaries when you identify and encounter areas of weakness means effectively delegating to and learning from team members whose skills fill the gaps in your skillset. If you lack a certain skill or if it feels inauthentic, avoid “faking it till you make it.” Instead, develop relationships with people who have the requisite skills to complement your abilities, while they help develop and improve the skills you are lacking, and deliver your client results.

**4. Be Open and Vulnerable:** It is easy to feel like you need to be rigid as a lawyer, but it is exhausting and ineffective to constantly put up a persona. Instead, seek out colleagues and clients with whom you can be open and vulnerable. Many lawyers strive to keep work and personal life separate and avoid having difficult and honest conversations. However, this can prove challenging when sensitive topics, such as childcare and mental health, affect you. Difficult conversations can bond and strengthen relationships with your peers, and honesty can help you connect with your clients. By opening the door for these kinds of conversations, you are allowing others to support you as a valued colleague.

**5. Pay It Forward and Accept Other’s Authenticity:** Empower associates and clients to be themselves around you by sharing your own personal and professional journey, including struggles and successes, and give them the space and time to do the same. Be cognizant and check your own implicit and inherent biases about who fits in and who you choose to mentor/support. Investing time in associates and clients outside of the confines of a matter or engagement will not only help them feel included and emboldened, but will allow you to expand your network and capabilities. By supporting your colleagues and clients, you are getting to know their motivations, interests, abilities, and goals. The time you spend helping them feel supported and heard, will pay dividends in retention and advancement for the entire team and in building client relationships.

I, myself, realized that authenticity is the key to achieving all three of my professional goals. By being authentic, I can capitalize on my strengths to serve my clients, establish meaningful relationships, and help new lawyers achieve their professional goals. Ultimately, this leads to greater career satisfaction. Companies that recognize and promote authenticity are most likely to retain more high-performing female lawyers whose goal is to ultimately rise into leadership positions.

Repeatedly, it has been demonstrated that diversity of all kinds, including background, experience, gender, and ethnicity leads companies to outperform their peers. NOT adapting yourself to fit into a uniform mold should create greater value for you and for your company. As women, let’s empower each other to take command of our unique abilities and use our individuality to gain leadership roles, best serve our clients, and ultimately, influence the next generation of lawyers to do the same.

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