

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Debevoise's Mary Beth Hogan

Law360, New York (January 14, 2014, 12:29 PM ET) -- Mary Beth Hogan is a partner in Debevoise & Plimpton LLP's New York office. She co-chairs the firm's litigation department and focuses her practice on white collar, regulatory and employment actions. She represents companies, boards, law firms and individuals in civil and regulatory proceedings involving federal and state regulators and private litigants in federal and state courts, as well as in arbitrations. In the past several years, she has represented a number of large financial institutions on various mortgage and credit card-related investigations and class actions.

Hogan served two terms on Debevoise's management committee, is co-founder of Debevoise's women's resource group and is co-chairwoman of the firm's talent development group. She also serves on the board of directors of Catalyst Inc., is president of the board of directors of Nazareth Housing and is co-chairwoman and a founding member of The Kate Stoneman Project.

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

A: I grew up with six older brothers (and four sisters), so being around and competing with men has always been a source of challenge and fun, not frustration. My earliest mentors in the law were men. Justice Gary Stein, for whom I clerked on the New Jersey Supreme Court, and then Roger Podesta, a senior litigation partner at Debevoise, both encouraged me to take on new challenges and taught me the fundamentals that have helped me since those early days.

I never had the sense that there were things I couldn't achieve because I was a girl/woman. I think that's because my parents and older siblings always encouraged and believed in me and because, by the time I started, there were women at Debevoise — like Mary Jo White, Barbara Paul Robinson and Franci Blassberg — who had already reached the highest levels of the profession. All of the women at Debevoise who have followed those three have benefited from their example, leadership, support and successes.

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

A: The biggest challenge for me is figuring out how to get the job done well, while also having the time to do the other things I want to do. My male colleagues, however, face the same challenge. We all find ways to try to strike a balance, including helping each other out whenever possible. This coming week, for example, one of my male colleagues is pinch hitting for me by giving an internal presentation so that I can make it to parent-teacher conferences. I have done the same for him in other contexts. Having colleagues who are all pulling in the same direction helps tremendously.

Another challenge for me personally is striking the right balance between my new job managing the litigation department and my old (and still current) one — practicing law. I am proud to be leading an amazing group of litigators and it's rewarding to manage the group, but I work hard at being a lawyer, too — working with clients and colleagues on interesting investigations and cases is still my passion.

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

A: I should say first that those episodes have been very rare and that my experiences with fellow attorneys have generally been positive. There was once, however, an adversary at a deposition who I was certain was treating me differently than he would have treated a senior male adversary. He seemed to think that making loud and frequent objections and speeches would throw me off or intimidate me. Once I saw what was happening, I sat back and looked at him calmly as he went into another tirade. When he stopped talking, I said nonchalantly, "Are you finished?" He seemed surprised and somewhat deflated and improved considerably after that. Getting angry would have played into his hands, but maintaining poise and confidence took the wind out of his sails.

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

A: All of the best lawyers I have known are passionate about their work. Work on figuring out what it is about being a lawyer that you find interesting (and even fun) and then look for a job that focuses on those areas. You also need to know your stuff. Preparation and thoroughness cannot be overemphasized. That preparation should give you confidence to speak up and believe in your ideas and analysis. Also, try to find someone more senior with whom you can strategize about where you are going, career-wise, and how you are going to get there. If you are lucky, that kind of mentor can also help find creative solutions to time management and other challenges faced by women with family responsibilities.

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

A: Read the Catalyst studies on sponsorship. People, men and women, make partner when their work is superb and when other people care deeply about developing and promoting them. My advice would be to make sure that talented women are getting the same opportunities — with assignments, with clients and with leadership opportunities — that men are getting. Offer women who are starting families part-time or flexible arrangements to help get them through the time when they may be unsure about whether being a lawyer at a large firm and a mother is going to be compatible. For me, that was the time when I had the most questions and when the support at Debevoise made a big difference.

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

A: Linda Imes of Spears & Imes. Linda was at Debevoise when I first started there in 1991 and I loved working with her. She was (and still is) smart, determined, successful and a lot of fun. She eventually left to join a smaller firm and has since formed her own firm with David Spears, another great litigator. She and David have now grown their firm to 11 lawyers and Linda's practice focuses on white collar defense work. I have always admired Linda's lawyering skills and style and have long been grateful for the way she welcomed me when I was a brand new lawyer.

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