

Female Law Firm Leaders: How We Broke The Glass Ceiling

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360, Grand Rapids (November 20, 2017, 4:07 PM EST) -- Even as more women enter the legal profession, the number who make it to the highest levels of law firm management is still small.

Examining the career paths of women who have defied the odds and made it to the top of their law firms, a few patterns begin to emerge — strong mentoring relationships, the opportunity to balance work and personal obligations and a strong belief that being a leader as a woman in law is possible.

According to a recent report by McKinsey & Co., women's perceptions of their ability to advance within their law firms are often fairly bleak, and those perceptions may be backed up by the data.

The survey found that while all law firms call gender diversity a very important or top priority, only 36 percent of women believe gender diversity is a priority for their firm, compared with 62 percent of men who do. And less than half of women say their firm is doing what it takes to improve gender diversity, compared with more than two-thirds of men who do.

The data shows those perceptions may not be far off.

The research found that for every 100 women promoted to partner, 141 men are promoted. And while women account for about 46 percent of associates, only 19 percent of equity partners are women, and they make up just 25 percent of those in executive leadership positions.

Here, five female law firm leaders share their tips on smashing the glass ceiling.

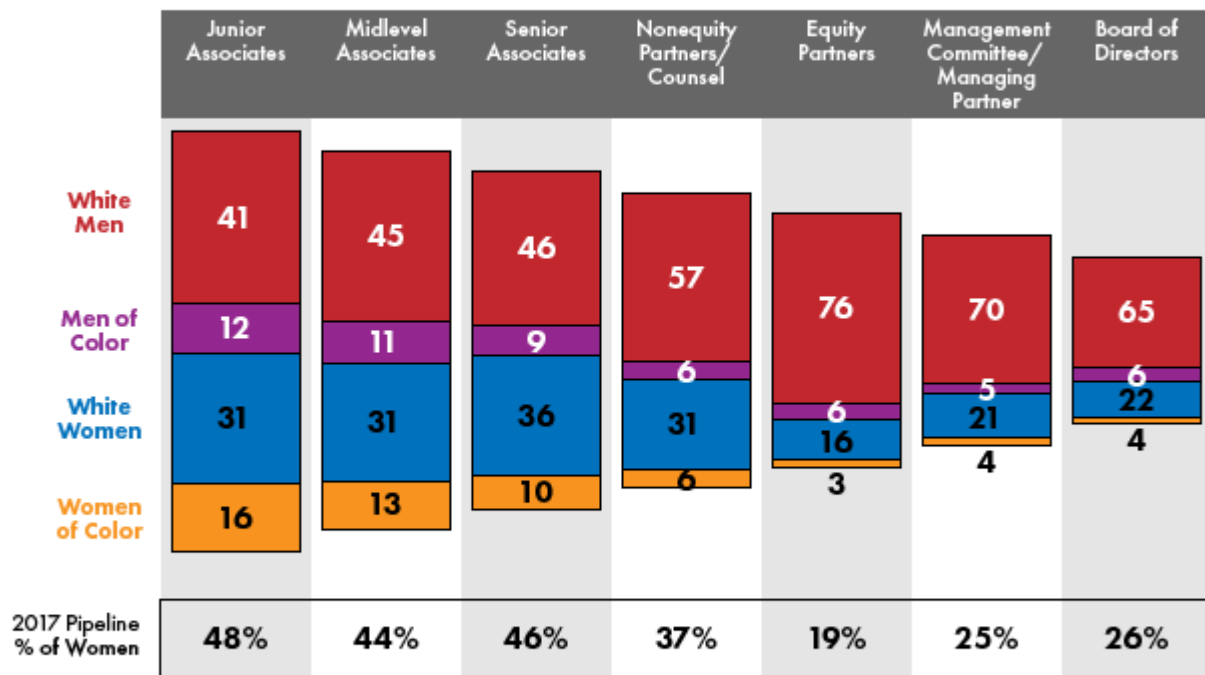
Tapping Into Powerful Mentors

According to the McKinsey report, women ranked senior-leader sponsorship, including coaching and growth and development opportunities, one of the most important success factors, second only to delivery of exceptional results.

And yet, the report found, only 36 percent of women expect coaching at their law firms, compared with 53 percent of men, and female attorneys are 20 percent less likely than their male counterparts to credit their supervising attorney or partner with providing growth and development opportunities.

Women Underrepresented In The Law Firm Pipeline

Female attorneys — especially those of color — decrease substantially at post-associate positions in 2017.



Total % of women and men per level in race and gender pipeline may not sum to overall pipeline totals, as the race pipeline only includes firms that were able to supply race data. Values may exceed 100% due to rounding.

Source: McKinsey & Co.'s "Women in Law Firms"

Grace Speights, the head of Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP's labor and employment practice and a member of its advisory board, says strong mentor relationships helped her along the path to become one of just a few women of color today in leadership positions at large law firms.

Early in her career, Speights says her mentors were largely men since very few women were in positions of power when she started at the firm in the mid-1980s after a federal clerkship.

"[The sponsors] made sure I got good work, put me in front of clients, put me on committees — I got a chance to show off my leadership skills," she said. "It started with hard work, good work and partners who were willing to invest in me."



Grace Speights

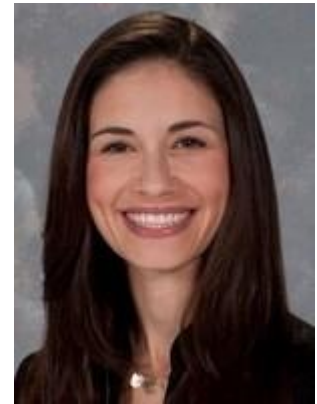
Rebecca Bratter, deputy managing shareholder at Greenspoon Marder PA, says she spent time and effort early on in her career — while still in law school, in fact — actively seeking out mentors.

As a second-year law student, Bratter became a summer associate at Greenspoon Marder in 2003. Each morning when she arrived at the law firm, she would check out the partners' assigned parking spots to see who was in the office and walk around to say hello to everyone. She says she would also regularly

request work and volunteer to come in on Saturdays.

Once she was hired as an associate, Bratter had access to the law firm's senior partners Gerald Greenspoon and Michael Marder because the firm was small at the time — it has grown from 50 to more than 200 lawyers since 2004 — allowing two of her primary mentors to be the two most powerful people in the law firm. And throughout her career, Bratter tapped those senior partners for work, taking on management duties fairly early on.

"I kept asking Jerry and Michael for more responsibilities, and they would say yes," she said.



Rebecca Bratter

Finding Work-Life Balance

Many female attorneys feel forced to make significant trade-offs between career success and their personal lives, according to the study by McKinsey. The management consulting firm found that 44 percent of women believe they can balance the two, compared with 60 percent of male lawyers.

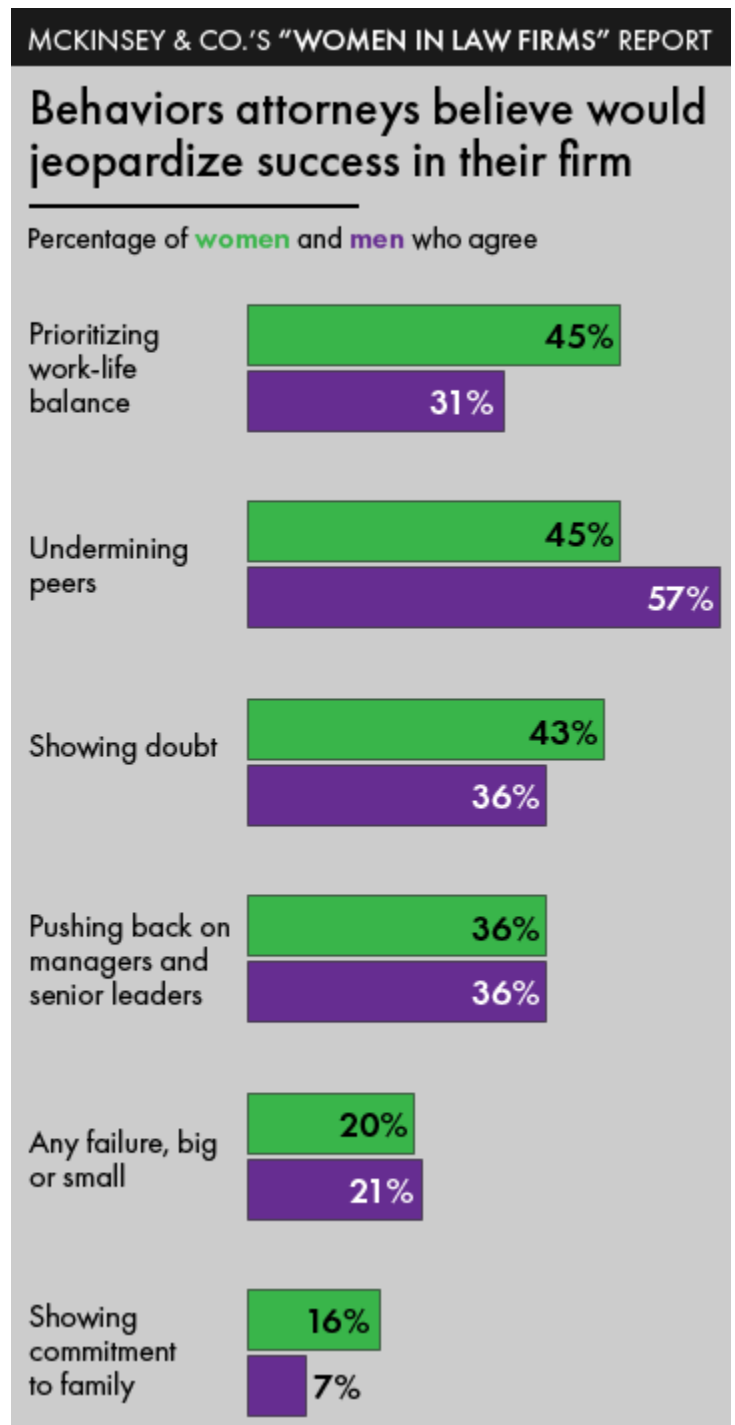
In fact, almost half of female attorneys call prioritizing work-life balance one of the greatest challenges to their professional success.

"I think the challenges I faced, many are similar to what a lot of women face," Speights said. "I was obviously trying to be a great lawyer, but also being a wife, being a mom and being a daughter. All of those things that we take responsibility for."

Speights points out she had a leg-up in some respects because she did not have to worry about finding consistent, high-quality child care because her mother lived with her family and helped care for her children.

"That freed me up a lot to be able to travel — knowing I had someone at home who could keep the house going was a big help," she said.

Linda Coberly, Chicago managing partner of Winston & Strawn LLP and co-chair of the firm's appellate practice, says one important factor that has contributed to her success was her law firm's openness to her desire to work reduced hours for a period of time while remaining on the leadership



track.

When her oldest child was born, Coberly says she began working on a reduced-hours basis and continued to do so for the next decade while her children were young. Not only was the law firm flexible with regard to her schedule, but she was also promoted to equity partner and elected to its executive committee while working reduced hours.

“At the time, my family situation was such that it was important that I take some extra time to be with my kids when they were small,” she said. “It was important for me and it made it possible for me to maintain my career.”

Coberly has tried to be open about the path she took so others can see that it’s possible to work an alternative schedule and still succeed at her law firm.

“I think it’s important to show women and men coming up that being reduced-hours doesn’t put you out of the running,” she said. “To be a reduced-hours lawyer is consistent with having a long and committed career in the law. The fact that a lawyer will for a period of time take a reduction in hours and pay, that’s just a chapter in the very long book of a career.”



Linda Coberly

Seeing Other Women Succeed

Many of the women in leadership positions today were trailblazers and did not have the privilege of seeing a slew of other women come before them. But they all agreed on the importance of having women in leadership positions to allow those behind them to see it is possible.

“I think it helps women in a lot of respects,” said McKool Smith PC’s Robin Cohen, who leads the firm’s insurance recovery practice and sits on its board of directors. “If women see other women are on these committees, it will attract more and better talent. Part of it is that they can see that women can succeed at this firm.”

Kathryn Sutton, the head of Morgan Lewis’ energy practice and a recent past advisory board member, says seeing a woman — Jami Wintz McKeon — at the helm of her law firm has been inspirational.



Robin Cohen

“Earlier in my career, I may not have believed it was possible — I hoped that it was. But to actually see that and the support within the firm for Jami because of her leadership abilities — that was just an amazing thing,” Sutton said.

According to Sutton, seeing a woman at the top of the law firm is not only inspirational for other female partners, but it also sends a message to those just starting out.

“You too can be in that position. Everyone has this opportunity. It’s no longer just the guys that are able to do this,” she said.

Demonstrating a clear path to leadership for female attorneys is not something law firms have, on the whole, been effective at doing, according to the data from McKinsey, which found that fewer women than men believe gender diversity is a priority for their firm and fewer believe their firm is doing what it takes to improve gender diversity.

Coberly emphasized the importance of law firms not only stating their commitment to diversity but also actually showing that commitment by demonstrating there is a path for women through the experiences of those who have served in management positions.

“I think it makes a huge difference in terms of the retention of women at junior levels,” she said. “One of the ways we articulate our diversity mission is to say that people of all backgrounds who are talented, we want them to have and to see that they can have a long and successful career here.”

--Editing by Christine Chun and Kelly Duncan.