

General Counsel Overcome Obstacles, Achieve Balance

by Ann Simeo Heinz

In May 2004, chief executive officers, general counsel of the Fortune 500, and managing partners of the nation's largest law firms met in New York City for "The Managing Partner and General Counsel Leadership Summit: Progress, Success, and Achievement for Women in Law." Leaders addressed the business imperative for retention and succession of female leadership and began the establishment of protocols to assure the advancement of women to senior positions and the creation of a model for benchmarking each firm's record of success. The Summit included a roundtable in which seven women general counsel discussed their backgrounds, obstacles, work/life balance, diversity, and strategies for women in positions of leadership and influence.

The following distinguished women participated in the roundtable:

Gail A. Lione, who led the roundtable discussion, has been vice president, general counsel, and secretary for Harley-Davidson, Inc., since 1997. Previously, she was general counsel for U.S. News & World Report and its affiliates, The Atlantic Monthly Company, Applied Graphics Technologies, Inc., and Applied Printing Technologies.

Paula Boggs joined Starbucks Coffee as executive vice president, general counsel, and secretary in September 2002 and leads the company's law and corporate affairs department. Her previous positions include vice president at Dell Computer Corporation and partner at Preston Gates & Ellis in Seattle.

Stacy L. Fox serves as senior vice president—corporate transactions and legal affairs, general counsel, and secretary for Visteon Corporation, where she also is a member of the strategy council. She has previously been general counsel at Johnson Controls, Inc., and Unisys Finance Corporation and associate attorney for Mintz Levin, Cohn, Ferris, Glovsky & Popeo, P.C., in Boston.

Elizabeth K. Lanier has been executive vice president—corporate affairs, general counsel, and secretary for US Airways Group, Inc. since March 2003. Her prior positions include general counsel for Trizec Properties, Inc., in New York and for General Electric Power Systems in Schenectady, New York, and Atlanta, and partner at Frost & Jacobs in Cincinnati.

Michele Coleman Mayes has been senior vice president and general counsel of Pitney Bowes since February 2003. Her previous positions include assistant U.S. attorney in Detroit and Brooklyn, managing attorney of Boroughs Corporation, and vice president and associate general counsel at Colgate-Palmolive Company. In 2003, she received the ABA Commission on Women's Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award.

Gloria Santona is executive vice president, secretary, and a member of the senior management team of McDonald's Corporation where she has been general counsel since 2001. She is a member of the board of directors of the American Corporate Counsel Association and a former chair of the corporate board of advisors of the National Hispana Leadership Institute.

Andrea L. Zopp has served as senior vice president and general counsel for Sears, Roebuck and Company since July 2003. Her prior positions include general counsel for Sara

Lee Corporation, partner at Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal in Chicago, and the first assistant state's attorney in the Cook County state's attorney office.

Gail Lione: Let's start by talking about the obstacles we each had to overcome to get where we are today.

Paula Boggs: Two played out early in my career. First, there weren't many female mentors. As a result, I looked for male mentors and mentors of other races. This is still an obstacle today, particularly for young women of color. The second was that people generally had lower expectations of me. I've been in situations where the presumption was that I would be less prepared, less analytical. Not only did I meet the expectations, but I exceeded them because the expectations were so low.

Andrea Zopp: When people have low expectations, they don't think of you when opportunities for advancement arise because your name isn't on the top of their list.

Boggs: I've also been held to a higher standard than others at different points in my career. For example, in the trial setting, jurors and other courtroom players typically had higher expectations of me and a greater memory of what I was wearing, what I said, and how I presented myself.

Gloria Santona: I started at McDonald's in the corporate area, which has always been my area of expertise. Being on the corporate as opposed to the litigation side has also been a barrier. Because our general counsel had been litigators, I had to show I could handle the job.

Michelle Coleman Mayes: I had the opposite experience. The fact that I was a litigator for many years was not viewed as a plus. Most people felt the general counsel should be a corporate lawyer, someone who worked on deals and did the proxies and disclosure statements.

Santona: Being a good technical lawyer can also be an obstacle to advancement because you're valued only for your lawyering skills. Then, when it's time to broaden your horizons, your own counsel may hold you back because he or she wants to keep you where you are, doing what you're good at. Another hurdle was that I was the first woman officer in the legal department and one of the first women officers in the company. There are good and bad things about being first. If you do a good job, you're lauded; if you do a bad job, it's a very public defeat. There's not a lot of room for error.

Elizabeth Lanier: There's also a narrow acceptable range of behavior for anybody who's not part of the majority culture. I've seen men behave in a broad range of manners without experiencing any adverse impact.

In contrast, women and people of color who have succeeded tend to have a narrower acceptable range of behavior. For example, a woman can't be too observant and quiet because then she will be given the "mouse/ ineffectual/not-tough-enough" label.

Zopp: Another problem is feeling isolated in the workplace. When a workforce isn't diverse, you talk only to people who are different from you. You can't share every issue with them. And there's no room for error. When you make a mistake, people remember; when the black woman makes the mistake, everybody remembers because there's only one of you at the table.

Stacy Fox: When I came to Visteon, I was the only outsider who was part of the original management team. It was a challenge because I came from another automotive supplier and knew how suppliers operated. It was quite a culture shock because the two work environments were enormously different. I was also used to working in an environment where whatever your background, gender, or race, it was truly a meritocracy. I went into a situation that was much more traditional and hierarchical. You had your sandbox, and they weren't anxious to see you

work outside of it. I was used to an environment where, if you were good, there was no end to the assignments you could get, and there was a lot of horizontal and vertical flexibility within the organization.

Lione: However old I was when I graduated from law school, I looked like I was 16. For a long time, the obstacles were youth and the absence of women in any work environment, much less law. Fortunately, early in my career, I worked for a woman at Nixon Hargrave. Watching her become a partner and balance her life while raising five children was inspiring.

Coleman Mayes: It's much easier to come up through the ranks in a company than to come in at a top level.

In my current job, the biggest challenge was trying to figure out the business model, which was probably the most complex I've had to learn. Every time I peeled the onion, there would be another layer I didn't quite grasp. As a result, they hired an executive coach for me when I started. We met twice a week for the first two weeks. She then gathered data about what I was and wasn't doing. She also went back to my old company to figure out what they thought I should have been doing or not doing. I got very unadulterated information from someone who knew the culture well.

Fox: Does everybody get a coach?

Coleman Mayes: It wouldn't be done for everybody who walks in the door. But it was a big plus that I had somebody I could be candid with. Because I work for a global corporation, I often work outside the United States. How I'm seen and received in another country isn't necessarily how I'm perceived here. It's especially difficult in Mexico, which is a machismo culture. Another key issue is the generational gap. At times, it's a real challenge to manage women who are substantially younger and see how they calibrate. When we talk about balancing work and life, I don't call it "balance." I call it "the work/life waltz." Either work or life has to lead at any given point in your life. Both can't lead at the same time, or it won't be a dance. And so I find that the women in my workplace are struggling with whether they can be part time *and* high potential. Sometimes young women don't have the same passion for their jobs as we do. They don't have the guilt that we have where we get up in the morning and go to bed at night thinking about the job. They don't have the same thirst or aspirations.

Lione: Their definition of engaged is different from ours.

Coleman Mayes: As it should be.

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