Angela Bradstreet, judge of the Superior Court of San Francisco County and former labor commissioner of California, was 24 when she came to the United States from England, estranged from her family, with $100 in her pocket. Arlinda Locklear, the first Native American woman to argue before the U.S. Supreme Court, recalls being “terrorized” in the 1970s by a law school professor who admittedly singled out the handful of women in his class. The first time Claudia Rast, a shareholder at the international firm of Butzel Long, faced a mediation panel as a young associate, the first questions she was asked were about “the lovely fabric” of her suit.

“Those kinds of things did happen, but I don’t see that anymore,” Rast says. These women—and thousands like them—persevered in a profession that was formerly considered a man’s world associated with hard work and aggressive battles to reach the top of the legal food chain. Discouraging statistics show that despite diversity programs and increasing numbers of women in the legal pipeline, the percentage of women in leadership positions is stagnating.

But on the other side of the coin, women are far more visible today than ever before and the role models for girls and young women are as diverse as they are plentiful. “Women today define success differently,” says Selena Rezvani, a leadership consultant and author of *The Next Generation of Women Leaders: What You Need to Lead but Won’t Learn in Business School* (Praeger, 2009). “Where once it meant making full partner, for others it might be opening up their own office.”

Amy Schulman, executive vice president and general counsel of Pfizer Inc., in New York City, agrees. “As more and more women come into the workforce, we have so many more models of female success and the range of options is getting more varied,” she says. “That’s so important.”

When all is said and done, women lawyers believe they need to perform at a higher than average level in such a competitive legal and economic environment. Fortunately, most women in leadership roles are quick to share what it took for them to achieve professional success.

**Find Your Style**

When Angela Bradstreet joined Carroll, Burdick and McDonough LLP in San Francisco, she was one of three women in the law firm. She became a managing partner in 1998 and left in 2007 to become labor commissioner for California.

Bradstreet says that finding her own style was important. After her first jury trial, when a male partner asked why she was trying to copy his style, she realized “the men were exactly right, and that really helped me. I needed to find my own style.”

“I think it takes more focus for women than it does for men,” says Arlinda Locklear. “Society places greater expectations on women, so I’ve always been fairly focused.”

Locklear, who is in private practice in Washington, D.C., is considered
a pioneer in Native American law. In 1975, she became the first Native American woman to argue before the Supreme Court on behalf of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. She has represented tribes throughout the United States in both federal and state courts.

Yet she recalls the first time she was sent to meet with representatives of the Sioux tribe. “Indian tribes have very strong views on women’s roles,” Locklear says. After the meeting, a tribal leader complained to the firm. “Not only was I not a Sioux—I wasn’t a man.”

The firm urged them to give her a chance, and eventually they were satisfied. “I don’t let little things like that pierce my skin,” Locklear notes. “It’s their problem, not mine. I was just going to do my job.”

**Deal with It and Move On**

According to research conducted by McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm with 99 offices worldwide, women leaders bring different elements to the table than do men. “Brain research has shown that women are better at multitasking, but they’re also much better at tracking,” says Susie Cranston, a consultant at McKinsey and coauthor of *How Remarkable Women Lead: The Breakthrough Model for Work and Life* (Crown Business, 2011).

Locklear’s ability to deal with it and move on is not necessarily something that comes easy to women. According to Cranston, women tend to replot things that go wrong, where men are able to shake it off. “If women are aware of this and leverage against this consciously, they are much better off. You have to find effective ways to pull yourself out.”

Before joining Pfizer, Schulman was a senior partner in litigation at DLA Piper in New York City where she practiced for 11 years. As the firm’s biggest rainmaker, she frequently leveraged her high-profile position on behalf of other women, catalyzing the firm’s leadership to work seriously in furthering diversity by developing talent.

Schulman says women often express frustration that they are not heard in meetings or that their idea is only taken up when repeated by a man. “The challenge is: What do you do with that? If you spend the rest of the meeting focusing on that point, then you miss the meeting.”

Unconscious bias works against the way women approach problem solving and present in meetings, Schulman says, but it is important to focus on practical solutions. She encourages women to be vigilant. “If they see this happening, they can use it as a way to enter the conversation while bringing in other people. Part of it is having a thick skin, and you have to learn to soldier on to some extent,” she adds. “But it’s incumbent upon leaders to make sure that organizations work to be receptive to voices that are trying to be heard.”

**Successful women leaders are optimistic, know how to build connections, and take time to rejuvenate and reevaluate.**

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**The Glass Is Always Half Full**

Five years ago in the San Francisco office of McKinsey & Company, Susie Cranston and Joanna Barsch wondered if there was a better way to retain women leaders as well as develop leadership skills in more women. Both women were experienced consultants in leadership training for women in business.

“We wondered if there was some kind of secret sauce that women had to have to be successful,” Cranston says. “What we found is there were really core themes that appeared anecdotally but were supported by science.”

Thus was born the Leadership Project. The team at McKinsey began interviewing women around the world who were viewed by their peers as leaders. Digging deeper, they found a broad range of scientific and psychological research that supported what they heard, and the team developed the Centered Leadership model (see sidebar).

“Much of leadership is the same whether you are a man or a woman,” Cranston points out. Hard work, knowing your market, doing your research, and the other specifics in any field are necessary elements for success. “But men have a broader range for what is acceptable. The Centered Leadership approach is how to authentically be yourself while at the same time making informed choices.”

The Centered Leadership model focuses on five elements that are applied to personal development. “Our research indicated that most women who were successful leaders felt their work had meaning,” Cranston says. “They were optimistic, knew how to build connections, and took the time to rejuvenate and reevaluate.”

“I think I’m optimistic and I’m genuinely passionate about the practice of law,” says Schulman, who also admits that she was never late to the party. “I’ve always believed it was important to have women in the room as colleagues, friends, and mentors, and this has helped me as a leader.”

Take Marcia Greenberger, founder and copresident of the National Women’s Law Center in Washington, D.C. The *New York Times* has described her as “guiding the battles of the women’s rights movement” since the center was established 40 years ago.

“You have to be optimistic and have a belief that we can figure out whatever the problem is and trust that our organization and staff together can make a difference,” Greenberger says. However, she admits that her
optimism is probably a trait that developed as her career progressed. “When I look back, I realize how much longer things have taken. Then some battles that I think we’ve won come back,” she points out. “So a positive attitude is very important.”

Greenberger emphasizes the importance of recognizing and acknowledging excellence in those around you. “You also need a sense of confidence in your own ability and your own expertise,” she says, even as you affirm the performance of others.

**Take Credit Where Credit Is Due**

Many women in law firms have expressed frustration over origination credit and succession policies. When it comes to negotiating, “it’s all about leverage, and something like origination credit is such a bargaining chip,” says Rezvani, whose latest book, Pushback: How Smart Women Ask and Stand Up for What They Want (Jossey-Bass, 2012), is about negotiating. “Women are often uncomfortable with claiming credit and promoting ourselves. We need to take credit and not be apologetic about it.”

Rezvani advises women to examine their feelings because many women feel uncomfortable that they’re bragging. Further, studies by the Project for Attorney Retention at University of California Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco discuss the “double bind” women face when they try to self-advocate. Women who stick up for themselves may be negatively received, yet they lose opportunities to advance if they don’t.

“It’s not bragging if it’s true,” Rezvani says. She urges women to talk about things in a factual way that’s hard to refute. “Present the information factually and stand behind it. The more women can self-promote in that way, the better it is for them.”

Claudia Rast is a shareholder in the Ann Arbor, Michigan, office of Butzel Long. She works with startups and expanding companies on emerging legal issues related to business and technology, particularly online and web-based companies.

“I’m not shy about asserting myself when I need to,” Rast says. “Many women are not as good as men at blowing their own horn. We’re used to working in the background, thinking that good work will win the day, and that’s not true in a competitive environment.”

Bradstreet agrees, pointing out that women often have their own internal glass ceiling in addition to the external barriers like unconscious bias. “Once I learned that it’s not personal—it’s all about business—I got over it. It’s okay to ask for what we want, whether it’s to be placed on a powerful committee in a law firm or speaking up to get a position of leadership.”

**Expand Outside Your Comfort Zone**

Alexis Alvarez was thrilled when she found out she was to be mentored by Angela Bradstreet as part of the American Bar Association’s Ms. JD mentoring program. “One of the first things that Angela taught me is that if you want to grow as a lawyer and a leader, you can’t be afraid to seek out opportunities and take on additional responsibilities.”

Rast agrees that leadership opportunities come when women expand their network. “It’s important to seek folks outside your comfort circle. It’s not a very human thing to do—we naturally tend to go with people who are like us.” Because women are not likely to shoot hoops with a colleague or join other male activities where relationships are forged, building a network must be a conscious effort.

Joan Hall, a retired partner in the Chicago office of Jenner & Block LLP, looks at taking the lead as an opportunity to ensure a project will progress. “If I thought the best way to make progress was to lead, then I would lead,” Hall says. “I always enjoy being a leader because I like to see things get there.”

Hall was the second woman lawyer when she joined Jenner & Block in 1965. She became a prominent commercial litigator and the first female chair of the American Bar Association Section of Litigation. With a long list of rewards and accomplishments, she could have rested on her laurels when she retired after 34 years. Instead, she switched gears and helped establish the Young Women’s Leadership Charter School, the first all-girls public school in Chicago.

“In our school, the girls hold all the leadership positions,” Hall points out. The school serves girls in grades 7 through 12, and three times during those years the girls must conduct a presentation to move on to the next grade. Hall brings the girls into a Jenner & Block conference room, where they present before a group of teachers and parents. “We’re very interested in developing the girls’ self-confidence,” she says, emphasizing her belief that the school is a way to further ensure a new generation of confident leaders.

**Leading the Way for Others**

The ability to work with others is often a skill that is developed. “One of the most important things I learned is communication,” Bradstreet says. “Part of my tenure in leadership has come from exercising people skills and being able to literally walk in and have a real live
Feedback and mentoring are also characteristics that Greenberger works to instill in her organization, as well as staying informed and receptive to new ideas. Greenberger points out that while the principle of mentoring is vital to bringing women into leadership opportunities, it can have a very direct payoff. "Through mentoring, our organization ends up with more allies and partners coming from many different organizations," Greenberger says. "We turn to people we've mentored at the center for advice, and over time some have done pro bono work."

Rast, recruitment chair for a large firm in the 1990s, recalls that today, that pipeline has slackened in part thanks to a shaky economy. "It takes real work to create diversity," she points out. "But if you seek the best people, you absolutely find women."

Five Dimensions of Centered Leadership

The Centered Leadership model developed by McKinsey & Company, an international management consulting firm with offices in more than 50 countries, comprises five dimensions of leadership:

**Meaning.** According to Susie Cranston, a consultant at McKinsey and coauthor of *How Remarkable Women Lead: The Breakthrough Model for Work and Life*, the feeling that work had meaning encouraged some women to take new paths and accept the personal risks when they set their goals. "There are a lot of ways you can find meaning no matter what you’re doing," Cranston says. "You can inject things into whatever you’re doing to enjoy the moment. Maybe it’s about relationships and connecting with other people, but how you find and inject meaning into your work is important."

**Framing.** Optimists are confident that they can manage challenges and move their teams quickly into action. A frame of mind can be crucial to making the right business decision. "When you do have something challenging and you feel like you’re spiraling down, take a minute to pause and think about what is really going on," Cranston says. She notes that taking the time to view setbacks as opportunities allows you to reframe the situation and move on.

**Connecting.** People with strong networks and good mentors enjoy more promotions, higher pay, and greater career satisfaction. And this goes beyond the role of mentoring. "Leaders we interviewed talked about the importance of having relationships with senior colleagues willing to go beyond the role of mentor," Cranston says.

**Engaging.** Many people think that their hard work will eventually be noticed and rewarded. However, most leaders create their own luck. "Women we interviewed see risk as a part of an opportunity," Cranston notes. Engagement is equally about risk taking.

**Energizing.** Burnout goes with the territory for men and women alike in many jobs, particularly in the legal profession. Women, however, often come home from the office to face a “second shift” of family and household responsibilities. "How you manage your energy is very nontrivial and key to success," Cranston says.