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National Women in Law Awards

RECOGNIZING TRANSFORMATIVE LEGAL LEADERSHIP



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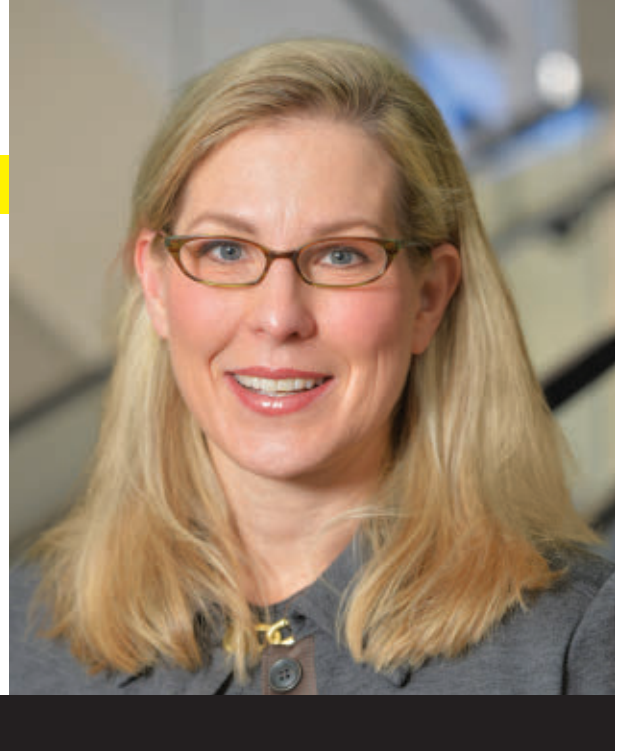
These profiles recognize North American women general counsel, in-house leaders and law firm partners who have demonstrated extraordinary leadership and business acumen as they have guided their organizations through often treacherous roads to success. These women stand out because they are business strategists, complex problem-solvers, and of course, great lawyers. And as important (especially to them) is that they are great leaders of people: They care more about the success of the team than their individual success.

SESLEE S. SMITH

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

MORRIS, MANNING & MARTIN, LLP

Partner
(Since 2004)



WHAT WAS YOUR ROUTE TO THE TOP? Becoming a lawyer seemed like a natural fit. I've always been good at writing, analysis and oral arguments. I would have gone into science but girls were not encouraged to do that. I still toy with the idea of medical school after I retire. I focused on becoming a partner when I entered law school and I never lost sight of that goal. Most women would say you make tremendous sacrifices to achieve this level and it did. In addition to sheer determination, extremely hard work and being very good at what you do, it means having to pick yourself up by your bootstraps and move forward when obstacles appear in your way. Never quit and never say die.

WHAT KEEPS YOU UP AT NIGHT? (I.E. WHAT ARE YOUR BIGGEST BUSINESS-RELATED CONCERNS?) The legal profession is more competitive than ever. There's tremendous emphasis on business development. You have to bring in new clients and maintain the ones you have. Plus, the sheer volume of demands is becoming greater. Technology makes working remotely easier for women but it also puts tremendous demands on lawyers to be responsive and have answers 24/7/365 to very complicated questions.

WHAT IS THE BEST LEADERSHIP ADVICE YOU PROVIDED, OR RECEIVED, AND WHY DO YOU THINK IT WAS EFFECTIVE? The judge for whom I clerked said, "Take action. It's not a matter of being perfect; it's taking action even if that action may be imperfect. If you don't take action, you're static—not dynamic." An action

may be imperfect but it's what your client and your firm want. Some lawyers miss becoming leaders in their firms because they don't raise their hands unless they have all the answers. They think perfection is needed, when action is. Instead of giving advice, I listen to and encourage my colleagues, whether lawyers or staff who support us. People often tell you what action they want to take so I give them the encouragement they need. Sometimes an executive assistant wants to be paralegal or financial analyst; a paralegal may want to be a lawyer. I say, "Why wouldn't you do that? Reach for the stars." Women are often very isolated and don't get the support men often do. Society unintentionally sets that glass ceiling. When you're a girl you think, "I can do anything." But as you get older you realize people don't really expect me to be a doctor or a physicist or electrical engineer because those are "boy jobs." Women need encouragement to regain the confidence that is whittled down over time.

LOOKING BACK, WHAT DO YOU WISH YOU HAD KNOWN WHEN YOU STARTED OUT IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION? Law is a professional services business. Being a good lawyer doesn't translate into getting clients. Business development is sales. Our firm started offering business development training through the Women's Initiative; now it's available to everyone. I wish I realized how important building your network is. A lot of excellent lawyers eat lunch at their desks instead of saying, "I've got to get out and network." It's extremely important. ■