



Celebrating the Stories of Morrison Cohen's Women

"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."

— Alice Walker

Women's History Month is a celebration of women's impact on history, culture and society – a month dedicated to reflecting on the often-overlooked contributions of women to United States history. The National Women's History Alliance has designated the theme of this year's Women's History Month as "Celebrating Women Who Tell Our Stories." This theme recognizes women who have been active in all forms of media and storytelling, who have devoted their lives and talents to producing art that reflects the human condition.

We are fortunate to have so many mediums that showcase storytelling today and so many incredible women authors, songwriters, scholars, playwrights and performers, from both the past and present. This month, revisit *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, listen to Brandi Carlile's "In These Silent Days" album, marvel at Michelle Yeoh's performance in "Everything Everywhere All At Once;" these are just a few modern examples of women telling women's stories.

In honor of Women's History Month and in keeping with this year's theme, we asked Morrison Cohen women partners to share their own stories about leadership, mentorship, what's most important in their day-to-day routine, how they achieve harmony between work and life and more. We are grateful to our women associates who helped put together the list of insightful questions, and here is what our partners had to say.

The Value of Mentorship

Our partners collectively remarked on how influential and instrumental their mentors have been throughout their careers. For Partner and Co-Chair of the Corporate Practice Randi Mason, "it is not possible to overstate the significant role that my colleagues have played over the years. I have been incredibly blessed to have not one, but two mentors who were both brilliant lawyers and wise people. They taught me a tremendous amount about the law itself, what it takes to be a good practitioner and even how to achieve work-life harmony as a young mother."

Partner and Co-Chair of the Technology, Data & IP Practice Jessica Lipson credits her former boss of 10 years with helping her to understand her role as a lawyer, what clients expect of her and how to manage law firm life. "The perspective I've gained from hearing other people's experiences and listening to those

wiser than me is priceless. My mentor was my cheerleader, my ally and my most important pillar of support at the firm.”

Morrison Cohen is proud of our formal mentorship program which enables our younger lawyers to cultivate mentorship relationships with more senior lawyers. But it does require a commitment by both parties, which can be challenging, especially for women.

“Understanding the systemic biases that can make it more difficult for women associates to build strong mentorships with partners who are well placed to help them professionally, I think it is that much more important for women associates to be thoughtful and assertive about seeking out mentors who are good personal and professional fits,” said Business Litigation Partner Gayle Pollack.

Executive Compensation & Employee Benefits Partner Tali Newman commented that she would not be where she is today without her professional mentors. “My mentors have taught me so much, from both a substantive and practical perspective.”

“The time you spend developing a mentor relationship is really time spent investing in yourself,” said Randi. This may be no more apparent than during the push to partnership. Mentors give invaluable advice on firm dynamics, what skills and dispositions need to be developed, how to best ensure that your achievements are recognized and more. When the moment for a promotion comes, mentors can often turn into champions.

Corporate Partner Deborah Weinberg believes that she would not be a partner at Morrison Cohen without those mentors who made the time to encourage and champion her. “It’s extremely important to find someone – ideally within your practice group – who truly cares about your career path and is happy to guide you and motivate you to keep improving. Having someone who personally models behavior and expertise that you wish to emulate is so valuable.”

Partner and Co-Chair of the Family Office Group Darcy Katris was incredibly lucky to work under a strong mentor who understood the importance of developing both a great skill set and a public persona to cultivate business and independence. Her mentor facilitated many speaking and writing opportunities and helped Darcy build her network and brand. “Based on the connection we forged over 12 years of working together, my mentor felt comfortable having me work more closely with her clients, and take on her clients after she retired.”

“Mentors are incredibly important to young lawyers, particularly people from underrepresented groups,” said Partner and Vice-Chair of the Business Litigation Practice Latisha Thompson. “If you never had a lawyer or other professional in your family, it can be very difficult to navigate certain professional spaces.” Latisha’s mentors helped her bridge that gap, but she says her career took off once her mentors turned into sponsors.

The distinction between mentors and sponsors is typically that mentors help you personally grow, while sponsors tend to recognize a person as a high performer and actively promote a person’s visibility. This might take the form of speaking on someone’s behalf or taking steps to give a person access to high profile, high visibility matters. In addition to providing advice and answers to your questions, sponsors advocate for you in spaces you may not yet be able to advocate for yourself.

"Sponsors introduce you to the powerful people in the room and often give you a platform for people to see what you can do. Those relationships almost always are organically formed, and frequently arise out of a mentorship relationship," added Latisha.

Practical Advice for Associates

When thinking back on the early days of their careers and what advice they would give now to new lawyers starting out, our partners agreed that taking initiative is one of the most important aspects for associates to embrace. Whether it is producing a perfectly formatted, typo-free document or drafting a client email for a senior lawyer's review without being asked, they should own the matter.

Executive Compensation & Employee Benefits Partner Alina Grinman commented, "Remember that you are a lawyer from day one, not an assistant to a senior lawyer." In Alina's experience, treating the senior lawyers as her clients – going to them with proposed solutions, not just problems – made her more valuable and built their confidence in her. "You may be wrong, but they will appreciate the independent effort you made to think through a solution. You'll quickly find that those problem-solving attempts (whether failed or successful) are irreplaceable in solidifying your knowledge, skills and confidence."

Alina encourages the associates on her team to be curious and push to understand the why. "Explore that nagging question in the back of your head that you'd rather ignore or wait for someone to explain. When you force yourself to play out a question you're uncomfortable with, you'll either spot a genuine legal issue or understand why it's not an issue, which is equally important."

Partner and Vice-Chair of Morrison Cohen's Real Estate Practice Nancy Nardella urges new lawyers who may be thinking ahead to the partnership track to find their passion, love their work and follow their noses with respect to the various career choices that come their way. "To me, success means enjoying the work that I do and knowing I have done my best and given my all in every project that I handle," said Nancy.

Deborah added, "Be the best lawyer you can be in your practice area by staying on top of current trends and changes in the law." She stresses the importance of taking ownership of your work, treating clients as your own and not as someone else's, and finding ways to get involved in the firm beyond your core work.

Gayle would advise women associates to not be so worried about being likable. She said, "My practice got so much easier and elevated when I was able to tell myself, and to believe, that I did not have to be likable or accommodating to be effective."

Achieving Harmony Between Work and Life

While the Holy Grail of work-life balance may be impossible to achieve, what is more realistic and, ultimately, more rewarding is achieving harmony between a busy career and a life outside of work. To do so, our partners rely on various support structures – human and organizational – to ensure they meet all their work obligations and tend to their personal lives.

"We need to build high functioning teams," said Jessica. "A truly high functioning team can tackle anything, because you're all rowing in the same direction." When you let your team know that you are there for them and make them feel valued, they will do the same for you, almost 100% of the time.

Jessica likes knowing she has her “village” solidly with her – colleagues who will handle matters if she has an emergency, family members who will step in to manage a personal issue while she is busy at work or friends who smile and graciously allow a rescheduling of dinner plans without judgement or becoming upset. She also names her husband as one of the people who have helped her most in her career. “We have been through some very difficult times together, and he has always supported me and my ambitions.”

Randi’s personal motto is “delegate and outsource.” She believes that just because you can do something doesn’t mean that you should. Randi feels extremely lucky to work with an amazing assistant whom she trusts completely to handle various client-related duties, and takes advantage of online services that free up her time at home. She is a big fan of planning ahead and making checklists whether work related or personal.

Decide on and then make time for the truly important things. “If your children have a soccer game on Saturday mornings, and those games are important, don’t miss them,” added Jessica. “Make sure your colleagues know that Saturday mornings are off limits. You may have to work later Friday or wake up early on Saturday to get the work done before you go, but make it happen.”

Darcy said, “It is hard to balance the demands of client service and being present as a parent, particularly as a divorced single working mother.” Darcy’s mother was an incredible support to her in achieving some harmony between her professional and personal obligations. Perhaps even more meaningful, she credits her mother’s help for bringing them even closer together as adults.

Our partners aim to prioritize their mental and physical health and happiness. Whether taking a moment to meditate, going for a walk or run or eating well, it is essential to do something that makes you feel powerful, strong and capable. Randi notes that in addition to getting some form of exercise nearly every day, she makes sure she has something fun on her calendar to look forward to.

Most Valuable Skills for a Lawyer

It requires more than just being smart and knowing about the law to be a good lawyer. A lawyer must also be diligent and thorough, think critically, have a client-centric mindset and be able to see the bigger picture. In today’s competitive market, it also means being technologically savvy and knowing a client’s industry and the unique problems they face.

But what was most beneficial to our partners in helping achieve partnership? Alina says the key to being recognized for adding value is to become indispensable to people. By taking ownership of their issues from beginning to end, they cannot easily overlook you. This is true for clients and partners alike, and especially for women.

The work ethic instilled in Nancy by her parents who firmly believed in a solid education and hard work set her on a path to success. Darcy added that she stays a step ahead on practice developments, takes on speaking engagements to publicize her expertise and writes articles for well-circulated specialist publications and the *New York Law Journal*. Even now that she is very established in her practice, she remains involved in professional organizations and keeps Morrison Cohen’s marketing team informed of her accomplishments so that they can disseminate and promote that news.

For Randi, it is all about really and truly listening – to colleagues, opposing parties and most of all, to clients. She commented, “It’s not enough just to get a deal done – it’s about getting it done in a way that

satisfies a client's business and personal objectives." Listening to what opposing parties really care about enables her to unlock the trades and compromises that result in a win-win outcome. Understanding what makes colleagues tick allows them to feel heard, even when deals get challenging. Feeling heard, in turn, builds rapport and strengthens the team. "And when our team is stronger, we are more efficient and give the very best of ourselves to our clients," she said.

In many cases, women lawyers have had to develop an internal skill set – a projected confidence and professionalism – to reassure clients and colleagues that they are serious about their careers. As a young lawyer, Partner and Chair of the Business Litigation Practice Danielle Lesser noticed that people who did not work with her on a daily basis would subtly try to figure out how long she had been in practice, what her experience was and whether she was a mother. "I felt like I always had to prove that I was a skilled and dedicated professional, that I could put in the hours and that I could handle the pressure of being a trial lawyer. I didn't see my male counterparts being put on the spot in the same way or needing to demonstrate that they prioritized career over family."

Danielle became sensitized to answering these persistent questions, internalizing responses that she later used to construct a way of comporting herself to discourage anyone from questioning her commitment to her career. "Years of building the muscle memory of reassuring clients and dissuading adversaries from underestimating me has been a helpful tool in my development."

Staying the Course

In the U.S., the legal profession has traditionally been a white male dominated business. Women have had to endure gender pay gaps, uncomfortable social dynamics and even rumor mills, and need to do more than their male counterparts to get recognized. As a result of these challenges, many women self-select out of law firms early on. We asked our partners what made them decide to stay the course.

"In my early years, I was quite often the only woman in the room," reflected Jessica. "But I see things changing. We have more women graduating from law school and entering the junior ranks of law firms today than ever before." For Jessica, it was always about the people. "There are always parts of the job that can be challenging, but if we do those jobs surrounded by the folks who support us, believe in us, and help us when things get difficult, we can handle the tough parts. That's why I stayed the course." Jessica was lucky enough to find those people before partnership, and has been very careful to pick her team now to continue the trend. In fact, on many business calls these days, she finds herself surrounded by women. "If we find the right team, we can thrive in any environment," said Jessica.

Tali thinks that many women self-select out of law firms because it is hard to balance work and parenthood. Often (not always), women are the primary caretakers in their families. "The time when you are coming up the law firm ranks is often the time when you have young children at home. I stayed the course because of my supportive and understanding mentor and colleagues," said Tali.

Latisha made a decision early on in her career to be there for all the important moments in her children's lives, while still being committed to her practice. Many days this meant signing off of work at 6:30pm to eat dinner with her family and put the kids to bed, before signing back on to work after 8:30pm. "While some could see this type of schedule as a weakness, it literally became my strength. Partners knew they could count on me to handle late night assignments and clients depended on me to be available when other lawyers were turning in for the night," commented Latisha. "I would have never wanted to be successful at work if it required me to sacrifice my success at home."

Gayle stayed the course because she appreciates the varied and sophisticated practice that has exposed her to a lot of different people and industries, and she values being able to exercise a fair amount of control over her time. "Success is the nexus of doing something well and still learning in new areas after 25 years, while also being able to prioritize what feels personally meaningful to me."

As more law firms continue to make strides to level the playing field and put a bigger emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion, we hope this will encourage more women to remain in their legal careers for the long term.

This Women's History Month, we are honored to share our women partners' stories and celebrate their achievements. Stopping to appreciate each other's stories helps to strengthen our understanding of each other and our connections to one another – a critical step in the ongoing battle to knock down barriers and achieve true equality for all.