INSIGHT

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Finding my voice: Building resilient economies for all

There is a particular kind of silence that settles over a room when people want to disagree, particularly within the hierarchical nature of a law firm. Early in my career, I sat inside that silence more than once, until the day I finally spoke up and was told that I was a square plug in a round hole. I remember the exact texture of the pressure that had kept me quiet until then: the sense that if I simply kept my head down, I could stay safe and keep my seat at the table. It was a self-imposed restraint, but the result was that I started second-guessing everything I did or said.

Safety of that kind is expensive. I realised that if I didn't speak, I would keep my seat but lose my sense of self. Self-doubt is loud in moments like these; it tells you the problem is you, not the room, and it took real effort to separate that noise from what I actually knew to be true. So, I decided to explore other avenues of growth, and perhaps, deep down, I was a square plug in a round hole. I had to learn a new sector, rebuild credibility I had already earned once, and accept that taking a different path could affect the pace of my progression. That was the real cost of searching for my voice: not the moment of speaking up, but the unglamorous rebuilding that followed.

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What I did not expect was how much that setback would deepen both my capability and my voice. Starting again forced me to understand a new sector from first principles, and that hard-won depth became a genuine asset; the confidence to speak from real understanding, rather than from title alone, followed close behind. I made Equity Partner a few years later than I might otherwise have done, but I have no doubt it made me a better lawyer, and a more audible one. That voice was tested most fully on the hardest transaction of my career: advising Anglo American plc on the demerger of its thermal coal assets into Thungela Resources Limited – a transaction that touched almost every discipline at once, from corporate, tax and employment to exchange control, competition and supply chain. My role included drafting and negotiating the transaction agreements, advising on structuring options, and chairing several cross-advisor workstream meetings.

Chairing those weekly calls was, in many ways, where I found my voice again: learning to hold a room of differing views and steering everyone in one direction, even when I did not feel entirely certain of my own footing. My advice from that experience: if you are ever put in a position of responsibility, do it afraid rather than not putting your hand up at all.

You will find your way through the imposter syndrome once you are in the room. That, I think, is close to the heart of what separates a good adviser from an exceptional dealmaker: technical skill can be taught, but the eagerness to genuinely understand a client's business and its wider ecosystem cannot, and neither can the willingness to sit in the discomfort of not knowing.

The hardest lesson my career has taught me follows from all of this: focus on your own lane, and do not measure your voice or your path against anyone else's timeline. Comparison is corrosive, particularly for women navigating rooms that were not originally built with us in mind, and it will drown out a voice you have only just learned to trust. Building resilient economies for all, in the end, means exactly that: people who understand the ecosystems they work within, who own their voices, who are not afraid to ask the 'stupid' question, and who learn in the process. The next generation of women in dealmaking will need a thick skin, grit, and the discipline to choose their battles; not every fight needs to be won, only the ones that matter. They will need an entrepreneurial mindset that comes from owning your own voice and your space as you walk into negotiating rooms, industry cocktails and conferences, holding conversations with confidence and selling yourself to people you have just met.

If I could sit down with my 25-year-old self over a cup of coffee, I would tell her this: Life is not easy, but see it as an adventure in self-discovery, and don't take it too seriously. Take the time to find your voice, your truth and your passion, and embody them. There is always light at the end of the tunnel, even when you cannot see how long it is. Hold tight to whatever you call your source of strength: a God, a force, an energy – whatever name fits – and trust it will not let you be swallowed along the way.

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