



INSIGHT

Aaliyah Buksh

Associate
Stein Scop Attorneys

Finding your voice

There are moments in every career when self-doubt is louder than confidence. Can you recall a time when you had to find your voice in a room where it would have been easier to remain silent? What happened, and what did you learn?

"Be prepared for change, be willing to take smart risks, don't be afraid to re-invent yourself." — Christine Lagarde, commencement address, Illinois Institute of Technology (2015)

The hardest lesson my career has taught me is this: wanting something and being willing to bet on it are not the same thing, and the gap between them is where most careers quietly stall.

Lagarde's line has stayed with me since I first heard it. She trained as a lawyer before she ever set foot in a finance ministry or a central bank; she knew, from the inside, what it costs to walk away from a discipline you're good at in order to chase the one you actually want and can be great at. That's the version of risk nobody warns you about when you're starting out. Not the dramatic leap off a cliff, but the quieter, less cinematic decision to leave something established – valuable mentors, a firm, a team, a reputation you've spent foundational years building – with no guarantee the next chapter pays off.

Throughout my law journey, I wasn't boxed into one lane. I cut my teeth across corporate commercial work, M&A, corporate litigation and general litigation; in court, in mediation rooms, urgent applications, in boardrooms, and even on secondment to a listed company. It was a genuinely broad training ground, and I'm grateful for every part of it; it gave me range most young lawyers don't get this early. But it was always the M&A – the data rooms, the negotiation tables, the adrenaline of a deal moving toward signature – that told me exactly what I wanted. Not a taste of it. All of it.

Here's the part that took me longer to admit: knowing what you want and doing something about it are separated by risk, and risk is uncomfortable precisely because it's supposed to be. I was established where I was. People knew my work. I had a track record, relationships, a comfortable rhythm, and a reasonably clear idea of what the next few years would look like if I simply stayed the course. But instead of staying silent in rooms where I was comfortable, I needed to use my voice to specialise fully in M&A, which meant walking away with no promise that it would work out. It's the kind of decision I'd counsel a client to model rigorously and stress-test twice before committing to. Rather, I had to make it on instinct, on conviction, and on a fairly unglamorous amount of

faith in my own thesis. There was no data room for this one. No due diligence report telling me the numbers checked out. That is the calculated risk I took when I made the move to a fully commercial team. I was, after all, first and foremost a dealmaker. The clarity of that focus is its own answer to whether the risk was worth it. Partial exposure to the work I loved was never going to get me here. Only full commitment could cure the defect, and the path I walk now has more than justified the bet. So that's the lesson, stated plainly: exposure is not commitment, and comfort is not the same as being on the right path.

But none of the risks would have meant anything without valued mentorship. I've been fortunate to have had great mentors – both women and men. What I learnt from the best of them wasn't only technique, it was character. Finding your voice in practice requires skills nobody puts on a CV – kindness and boundaries must hold at the same time. Kindness without boundaries burns you out and teaches people to take more than they should. Boundaries without kindness make you effective, but forgettable. The mentors I admire most hold both warmth and formidability, often in the same sentence. And here's another thing nobody tells you when you start out: this profession will test your resilience quietly, loudly, and all at once. I've heard people say legal practice isn't for everybody, but that doesn't matter; if you are in it, just show up and do the work. I don't think that's all it is. What matters isn't only that you just show up; it is how you choose to show up that makes all the difference. Range matters. Adaptability matters. Hard work and smart work matter, but resilience and passion matter more than all of these combined. At some point, you have to back yourself on what you actually want before you have proof that it'll work, because that proof only exists on the other side of the decision.

If you're soft, be soft; it's not a weakness. And if you're tough, hold your line – it's not a weakness either. Neither softness nor toughness is the job. Set out to find your voice solidified in your own character, and that is where you will thrive. Competence, integrity, a hunger to keep learning, and heart – that's the job. Everything else is just how you happen to carry it. Fortitude has to include failure, because it will happen, and it isn't the end of the story; it's part of it. Try, get it wrong, learn, come back sharper and no less yourself.

Find your voice, whatever that may be, and bet on yourself – you can use it to redefine your life. If you already know what you want, the risk isn't really a risk. It's just the price of admission.

I paid mine. I'd pay it again. 🐾

