



INSIGHT

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Finding your voice is inseparable from personal and professional self-expression and development

Law is a high-performance environment. To succeed, you must have a voice. Long gone are the days where juniors can attend meetings, listen and take notes as living dictaphones without adding to the conversation. Numerous digital tools now perform that function.

That doesn't mean that we should ignore the fact that law can be difficult to acclimate to. The pressure is not only hierarchical and client-driven; it is a status quo that young lawyers entering the sector can find quite daunting. Furthermore, as practitioners, you are often competing with one another, in addition to other firms in your field of work. Promotions are not always given, the process is more complicated than this, often requiring you to apply and motivate for the promotion to a new role. This requires you to have a voice and be your own champion. This can cause underlying tension between colleagues you may know well and personally like.

As a woman in a male-driven culture such as law, this inherent competition can be detrimental to the formation of common bonds between women in the workplace, with our collective identity subsumed by a culture that, for centuries, has been male-defined. That's why it's so important that women within the legal environment stand together and use their voice to call out poor and demeaning behaviour when they see it.

Silence is permissive. The work environment is difficult enough. The power dynamics found in law are echoed in fields such as politics, where success and advancement depend on a combination of talent and social acumen, built on dynamics that still favour one group of professionals over another.

You are not alone, but you cannot be heard if you don't find and use your voice

One of the more limiting attitudes I encounter among women early in their careers is the assumption that when they speak, they will not be heard. By the time you find yourself in rooms or engagements alongside senior colleagues, it does you a disservice to believe you are there by accident.

Your voice is valued, and you never know who is listening. Diversity of opinion drives excellence, and by not using your voice, you deny yourself the best opportunity to sharpen the debates that lie before you. Over the course of a long career, there will be many instances where you may be mistaken, but never assume you are wrong for speaking in the first place. Honest engagement is a far livelier teacher than an attitude couched by over-caution.

Do not be silent. Do not discredit your own experience and worldview because you self-censor. Express your professional

opinion – you'll surprise yourself by what happens when you have the conviction to speak in a meeting where you may think you are the 'junior'. I have seen highly talented women professionals do themselves a disservice because they didn't find their voice, or worse, chose not to use it. Over time, that lack of vocal visibility compounds, leading to others receiving the lion's share of exciting and meaningful matters.

I've often been involved in complex matters, and while self-doubt may be nagging away below the surface, I share my opinion regardless. After engagements like these, I've received follow-ups from senior practitioners and colleagues concerning the thoughts I doubted hours before. Someone is always listening, even though you may think otherwise.

Never limit yourself. If you are being ignored beyond the merits of your argument, then the person making that choice was never going to change their mind in the first place. Be the strongest advocate for your own actions.

Hierarchy serves a purpose, but it should not promote subservience

The professional legal environment is hierarchy driven, which serves the valuable, pragmatic purpose of bringing order to a profession that thrives on it.

However, that doesn't mean our voices as professionals in the industry should be subservient to hierarchy at all costs. Speaking up is the best way to present your 'brand' in the workplace. You have to advocate for yourself. While others may assist you and help create an enabling environment, seizing the visible and hidden opportunities before you is, ultimately, your own responsibility.

In addition, while I strongly advocate and encourage women to truly master their own agency, men and senior practitioners have a crucial role to play. They cannot stand idly by and permit poor behaviour by their professional peers or clients. While I recognise the complexity of the power dynamics at play, law professionals are approached for their expertise. That means our words carry weight from the moment a client or even a colleague walks through the door. At a most basic level, we spend our careers interpreting the meaning of words in context. It's a trait that should also be applied to raising the bar of behaviour I observe in the industry.

In summary, if there is one thought I wish to emphasise, it is this: find your voice and use it, so that the sacrifice of the voiceless who came before us, and the lessons they have imparted to the profession since, were not made in vain. 

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