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The long boardroom table

I have practised for 28 years at two of South Africa's top tier law firms in corporate and commercial law.

The power of relationships

The hardest lesson I have learned is that relationships, not technical ability or hard work, are the key ingredient to success in a large corporate. Being technically excellent, or the most thoroughly prepared, is simply not enough on its own if you have not invested in the trust that makes clients and colleagues want to work with you again. Relationships play such a pivotal role in our advancement in the workplace, which I had not initially appreciated.

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Passing the baton

The need for a champion is critically important for exponential career progression.

I had spent many years working on self-generated corporate transactions before my first genuinely large deal arrived. At the time, it was one of South Africa's largest private equity transactions. I was brought onto that matter to support the lead partner, a much more senior man, with whom I had never previously worked. He was quickly impressed with my skills, my work ethic and my rapport with the investors, corporate financiers, bankers and community stakeholders, so much so that he stepped back and gave me the space to lead the significant transaction, which was later shortlisted for Private Equity Deal of the Year at the DealMakers Awards. Despite my own efforts, it took someone else to open doors for me - a senior female partner and industry leader had advocated for me to be added to that deal team and the deal lead was willing to take a chance on me.

There is so much value in taking a chance and passing the baton to more junior team members for their growth and development.

The client's best interests

Over the years, I have come to believe that what separates a good adviser from an exceptional dealmaker is judgment: the ability to read whether the other side's position is genuine or tactical, to know when silence will achieve more than argument, and to sense the moment a negotiation shifts from substance to ego. It also means being able to spot the risks that others miss entirely - the blind spots - and to provide practical, efficient solutions to them before they become problems. Legal technique can be taught, but judgment, and the composure to exercise it under real pressure, largely cannot.

Seat at the table

On what needs to change for the next generation of women in dealmaking, my view is this: my generation largely advanced by over-preparing and under-asserting, quietly minimising the effort behind our own success rather than owning it. That pattern needs to change. Firms need to move beyond informal mentorship towards structured sponsorship that actively shapes who is put forward for partnership, profile-building, pitch teams, client teams, external recognition opportunities, and for the deals that build reputations. Clients have a role to play too, in expecting diverse deal teams as the norm, rather than the exception. Progress has been made, but it remains slower than it should be.

In hindsight, I would tell my younger self that finding the people who want you in the room, and investing in real relationships with them, matters more than trying to earn respect through technical excellence and endless hours working. Actively nurturing skills and staying on top of legal and industry developments is critical to maintain excellence. Spend more time with clients and colleagues, and less time labouring invisibly behind a desk. Learn to delegate to those with whom trust is built.

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