Proskauer

Women in Law: Vikki McKay Q&A

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Vikki McKay is a partner in Proskauer's Corporate Department and a member of our Private Equity Real Estate practice and Hospitality, Gaming & Leisure group. At Proskauer, Vikki serves as a PWA Steering Committee partner liaison.

Read below for excerpts transcribed from our in-person interview with Vikki McKay.

What are some of the biggest factors and practices that have enabled your career to flourish, and with that, how do you pay that forward?

Vikki McKay: One of the greatest factors has been surrounding myself with people who mentor and support me and want to see me to flourish into the best version of myself. These people have helped me go after my career goals as opposed to trying to make me be more like them. While we should embody the same principles, it's important to have your own professional style and methods on how you go about achieving those same aims.

I also think it's easy for my generation to turn around to the next generation and tell them they should want what we wanted, but I think success was measured in a much more linear and binary way compared to today. I am cognizant of that when I am mentoring associates and focus on the broader aspects of mentorship, which is about generosity, how you share your relationships and how you share your knowledge.

It is a different career today and we should celebrate that they have more paths than we had and they're the better for it. How they'll measure success in their career has changed. One of the biggest challenges for my generation is not making assumptions for them based on our experience. I focus on bringing the best things out of my experience that can help them achieve what they want to be successful, not how I would have measured success in my time.

What is the most powerful advice you've ever been given?

Vikki McKay: I think it goes back to the same theme - being the you that you want to be. I had mentors who told me not to get lost in the profession and the archetypes of the profession. Find *you* in that profession and be it to the best of your ability. Find what's great about *you* and live it and sell it. You can look yourself in the eye if you do that.

How would you talk to the next generation of lawyers about entering big law?

Vikki McKay: I think now, it is far more nuanced. Big Law can be your world if you want it to be, but it can also be a way into other things. It's not closing doors and it still opens doors. Sometimes associates come in, and they feel reticent to express that they don't think they will be in Big Law the whole of their career. They shouldn't worry about that. They shouldn't worry about us judging.

Sometimes they go and spread their wings somewhere else and find the right fit and the best thing for them. Even more, sometimes it is the best thing for the Firm, because they come back as alumni that we can have a relationship with in other powerful ways.

In what ways do you mentor and pay it forward?

Vikki McKay: I believe that part of the role of the partner is also developing the next generation. And that involves giving of yourself, sharing your expertise, and providing a bit of teaching.

You must be willing to share your real-life experience. You must be honest about things that have gone right for you, as well as the things that you wish you'd done differently.

This next generation is seeing you after 20 years in the profession. You've got to be willing to paint the picture of you when *you* were them and express honestly how you got to where you are now. It's not saying they must follow the same journey, but expressing “I've had the downs, I've had the moments when I thought, what am I doing, why am I here, I'm never going to get to achieve or know how to do something.” I'm very much an open-door person, in terms of you can come into my office, happy, sad, I want to hear about it. You've got to want to foster that level of trust by being a human being outside of the work, as well. If you don't do that, then there's a lack of honesty, and if we all pretend we're perfect all the time, or that our jobs are perfect all the time, we aren’t painting a realistic picture and we’re doing the next generation a disservice.

As women, there's still fundamentally less of us at the top levels of firms. As much as we would love that to be better, it's still a fact. And as women, we've gone through certain things, we've fought certain battles, be they internal or external battles, and I believe we must show that vulnerability. Many have generated their own armor due to the struggles women sometimes face but sometimes we've got to toss the armor and say, “That’s the professional me, that's how I cope sometimes, but this is my other side.” When mentoring, showing a similar vulnerability that you deal with can be empowering. But sometimes we must be the strong person, the defender, the protector. And that's part of our role with paying it forward as well.

What are you most hopeful and inspired about today?

Vikki McKay: I think the uncertainty in the markets and constant speculation about the state of things brings us together because we must work better together.

In that togetherness, there is opportunity to work on exciting or challenging deals, and that really inspires me. I work with junior associates, and as I watch them step up and share what they want to achieve, I want to understand and support them. That kind of thing makes me feel good at the end of the day.

If you could go back to your younger self and give yourself advice, what would you say?

Vikki McKay: Don't be so scared all the time. Don’t be so afraid about what people might think. Do it. It has worth; it has value. And just take the jump into the void.

What advice you would give about developing client relationships to a more junior person?

Vikki McKay: Don't believe the obvious thing about client development, which is that you're bringing a client in from nothing. That is so rare. We all stand on somebody else's shoulders. That doesn't mean it's not your achievement when you get something in, but it's a team approach. You build on somebody else's achievement; you don't walk up to someone in the street and get work.

Focusing on expanding and building your client relationships and creating, more touch points with a client makes them more likely to stay when someone departs. That is hugely important. We, in the UK, call it “institutionalizing clients.”

Never underestimate your role in that. For the very juniors, it's about going out there and being their best lawyer, getting the bits of feedback, because those people will be there in the future.

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