

# THE RECORDER

## YOUR CAREER

# Leaning into the legal profession

It's possible to have both a career and family,  
but you have to be assertive and take a seat at the table

Michele Corvi

**F**or the past 10 years, I have been captivated by the award-winning television series *The Amazing Race*. I am a mother of three, who also works as a partner in a bustling law firm in San Jose. Of course, I am drawn to a show that involves teams vying against each other in a race around the world, competing in various challenges to be the last team standing. It's the race; it's the competition; it's the sense of victory. I am the quintessential contestant, because I am running a race every day. By self-definition, I am a lawyer on the move.

When Sheryl Sandberg released her new book in March, "*Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*," my interest was piqued. What advice could I take from this woman leader from my generation who detests the label of "bossy" for young girls and examines the myth of "doing it all"?

Her call to lead struck a chord with me as a woman, as a mother and as a lawyer. I share her dream for more women to hold leadership positions and admire her call for women to

"lean in," take opportunities and have a seat at the table.

When I was in college, I interviewed for a part-time retail position at Banana Republic. The manager asked me to use an adjective to describe myself. Without hesitating, I replied, "Assertive." I distinctly remember the surprised look on her face, as if no young female applicant had ever responded as such. I got the job.

People often ask me how I do it all.

How am I able to be a partner of a law firm, coach soccer and also volunteer in the classroom without a nanny? I never know how to answer because it is a constant balancing act. The irony is that I do not feel like I do it all. On the outside, I made my dreams come true. I be-



came a lawyer, had a family and was elevated to partner. On the inside, I am constantly looking for a telephone booth to transform into my superwoman outfit. The problem is that there are no special telephone booths. My protective armor consists solely of my Theory suits and

Manolo Blahnik shoes. I have made sacrifices when necessary and have learned that it is OK to adjust my plan along the way.

My advice to lawyers trying desperately to do it all:

**1. Surround yourself with people who believe in you.** Always dream big and believe in your dreams. In order to make your dreams become a reality, you must surround yourself with people who see you as you see yourself. It is very difficult to run the race without a supportive spouse, family or friends. If people do not believe in you then there should be no place for them in your life.

**2. Be prepared.** Take the time to prepare. Take the time to think through your arguments and the other side's positions. The more prepared you are, the more confident you will appear. Confident and well-prepared lawyers persuade others and win cases.

**3. Nothing happens by accident.** Do not be afraid to promote your successes. Own your victories and your defeats. Learn every step along the way. You may not understand why something is happening in the moment, but there is always a reason and a lesson to be learned.

**4. Nervousness is OK.** Whenever you are preparing for a big argument or making a court appearance, it is OK to feel a little nervous. In fact, the nerves keep you relevant. The moment you do not feel nervous is when you may need to reassess your direction.

**5. Keep a "star" folder.** When I mentor new lawyers, I always tell them to keep a star folder. It may sound silly, but I tell them to save all of the emails and accolades they re-

ceive from clients, adversaries and colleagues. Trust me, when you are down and feel like you cannot make anybody happy (and it does happen), this file will lift your spirits and remind you of all of your strengths.

**6. Have one good "safe" colleague.** Develop a bond with a colleague that you trust. Build a mutual relationship based on trust and respect. Having somebody that you can go to and help you work through a difficult legal or personal issue is critical to your success. This person should be an equal and not somebody you would consider competition.

**7. Don't be afraid to ask for what you want.** You will never know if something is an option unless you ask for it. When I was pregnant with my first child, I asked management whether I could have a flexible schedule to adjust to my new family structure. At the time, this situation was not common at my firm, but I asked anyway. To my surprise, I learned that they were open to the idea and wanted to make it work. As a result, I was able to make my own path, which still led to partnership, and paved the way for other women lawyers in the office who wanted a family and a career.

**8. When an opportunity presents itself, take it.** Sandberg speaks of opportunity throughout her book. Her message is a good one. You never know when opportunity will arise. Sometimes it is the result of hard work and sometimes it is the result of happenstance. Regardless of the reason, never turn down an opportunity that promotes growth, whether it is speaking at an engagement, writing an article or sending a personal handwritten note. You never know what door it will open and you will not regret it.

**9. Be kind.** As a family lawyer, I have seen and heard it all. One of the things I take away from all of the emotional drama is to never judge. Be kind and always treat your clients and co-counsel with respect. Remember you are helping to navigate them through a tumultuous time. It's not about you; it's about them.

**10. Advocate.** Never forget that you are an advocate. You are the voice, representing your client. Be passionate and steadfast. As a new lawyer, a more seasoned lawyer, on the opposing side, referred to me as "vociferous" on the court record. Looking back, I doubt that this was meant to be a compliment, but I took it as one. In my mind, it was the moment that I "arrived" as a lawyer, and I have not looked back.

Is it possible to "do it all"? I agree with Sandberg. Nobody has it all. The real quest is the hunger to always want more, whether it is more at work, more at home, or more in life. All three things are inherently connected. To want more is to do more. For me, I will not be sitting around waiting for a call from *The Amazing Race*. Instead, I will keep on running my own race, and when the call comes, I will be ready.

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