

Leadership, Careers, and Women in Law Roundtable

By Nicholas Gaffney
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Law firms have taken important steps in recent years to increase gender equality and provide senior-level support to advance women into the top echelons of leadership. The ambitious efforts are paying off. What is it like at the top, and how can women interested in a law firm management career successfully make the climb?

Law Practice (LP): When did you become managing partner at your firm, and how did it come about? Was it a goal you'd set for yourself and worked diligently toward, or a less straightforward path?



Kelly Rittenberry Culhane, co-founder and co-managing partner:

My co-founders and I created Culhane Meadows in 2013, having practiced together for many years. I was in a national management position at our previous firm and was driven to make a difference, but like most women in my position, I lacked authority and autonomy. The ceiling was real... and low. I did not wake up one day and think, "I'm going to start a firm and disrupt the legal marketplace"—but this is exactly the decision I made the day I learned that my compensation was arbitrarily cut (having just met a goal set by the managing partners). I felt I had no choice and was actually told that if I had "a better way" to run a firm, I should start my own. We all heard the same

message... hence our tagline, "Culhane Meadows, A Better Way."

LP: How would you describe your leadership style? Do you think the fact that you're a woman has any impact on this or on your vision for the firm?

Culhane: My approach to leadership combines resilience and agility, along with grit and the ability to ascertain which risks are worth taking. I tend to pull from my previous life as a commercial litigator and mediator in times of conflict, as I saw all too often how nobody wins when there is a lack of alignment. The fact that I'm a woman absolutely has an impact on how I lead and my vision for the firm. I "retired" the day my daughter was born, and when I started my second act, I didn't want to take a step down from the sophisticated practice I had enjoyed prior to taking time off to be a stay at home mom. I have a great deal of empathy for all professionals who choose to take time off or were held back due to a glass ceiling/discrimination, and I want to offer them an alternative.

LP: How is having a female managing partner good for a firm's business?

Culhane: Being a woman does not make me a better managing partner, but it allows me to bring my personal experiences to the leadership table. Welcoming and learning from diverse perspectives is key to effective leadership, and I'm blessed to be part of a firm with a diverse mix of leaders—male and female—who bring their unique perspective to the firm's overall business strategies. We are a *minority* firm with the *majority* of management being female. In fact, we are the largest full-service women-owned law firm in the US and, as such, our firm is able to offer the diverse perspectives and experiences that many companies, including Fortune 1000 corporations who have committed a portion of their legal spend to minority firms, a value in their legal representatives.

LP: How have you altered your firm's business model or structure, if at all, to compete in a rapidly evolving legal landscape?

Culhane: We started with the goal of disrupting the traditional law firm model, including empowering our attorneys to choose where they work, which is especially relevant now the entire world is being forced to work at home. We've been doing this for seven years and our infrastructure is set up to permit remote work, so our clients haven't had any disruption in service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our compensation is completely objective and transparent, and our attorneys see a large portion of dollars collected from the work they

perform. Leadership has no ability to alter a partner's compensation, and there are no minimums, points, comp. committees, or politics. We foster a collaborative environment using the latest encrypted cloud-sharing technology that encourages our attorneys to work together, and our formula-based compensation system ensures each attorney knows exactly what he or she will earn on each matter for which they work.

LP: What initiatives or other work has your firm done to attract and retain female attorneys and other underrepresented groups? Is there anything you think has been particularly successful?

Culhane: We did much of the work upfront. For example, one of our attorneys (a minority woman) recently gave birth to a child. She arranged for another partner to handle matters in her absence, and she continued to receive her draws under our compensation formula (which compensates attorneys who originate work even where they do not work on the matter). This permitted her to determine the length of her maternity leave without any need to seek permission from management and when she was ready, she was able to transition back into her practice at her own pace. Aside from obtaining her client's consent, there were no obstacles or "backlash" for taking all the time she wanted to enjoy her new baby. We're committed to attracting outstanding women and other underrepresented groups and part of that initiative is being proud and active members of NAMWOLF.

LP: You're given the power to change one cultural or institutional aspect of the legal industry to make it a place where more women can thrive. What do you do?

Culhane: Compensation structures—that's it! It all starts with rethinking how fair and balanced compensation is determined, which means rejecting the traditional "black hole" decision-making process by a compensation committee working behind closed doors. This type of secretive and subjective tradition is a direct contributor to the well-documented gender pay gap in the legal industry. At Culhane Meadows, there is absolutely no difference in the compensation formula between male and female attorneys because everything is 100% objective and transparent. We have eliminated the concept of minimum billable quotas and each attorney is empowered to determine their own billing rates. Over the past five years, about half of our top 10 highest-earners each year were women—a figure that is likely unmatched by any other national law firm in the U.S.

LP: Do you think firms have become a better place for women to build and advance their careers in recent years?

Culhane: Candidly, we hear a lot from leaders at traditional law firms about diversity and inclusion committees, as well as the appointment of minority women (and men) who lead these committees. Progress is being made, but the raw data about advancement and compensation suggests that *meaningful* change (a true movement of the needle) has yet to arrive. Culhane Meadows rejects the old school approach by offering every

attorney the opportunity to create a unique work/life/family balance, control their schedules, make more money, and serve highly sophisticated clients (more than 25 of which are Fortune-ranked). Equally important is the fact that no one (male or female) at our firm must ever choose between partnership track or family commitments. We give both single- and two-parent families the flexibility to manage childcare, attend school events, and support aging relatives.

LP: What advice would you give to women coming out of law school who desire to become a partner in a law firm?

Culhane: If she wants to have a sophisticated practice and make partner, I would suggest that she focus on getting trained at a large, traditional firm that truly has a focus on diversity and inclusion and when she feels she has the toolkit necessary to run her practice and manage clients, she can join a firm that offers the opportunities and business model that best meets her personal and professional needs. There are options out there for accomplished, experienced women—we know because we're always looking to add to our pool of talented attorneys. Culhane Meadows is open to considering the candidacy of lateral partners who have built a practice and have at least eight years of experience (at a large firm or sophisticated in-house department) because we know that many women and other underrepresented groups are kept from the partner track through no fault of their own.

LP: What are some other challenges in the legal profession that you see for the generation of women behind you?

Culhane: It is an extremely challenging market right now. Unfortunately, even pre-pandemic, for the recent generation of law students a law school degree is by no means a sure path to a satisfying legal career with an income sufficient to service the law school debt incurred to pay for today's increasingly outrageous tuition. For example, a well-known top 25 school costs over \$300,000, but only about 40% of its graduates are being hired by employers that pay top salaries. Lower ranked, but still costly, schools may have 0% of their graduates hired by top firms. My advice is to look closely at all these statistics before going to law school and only proceed if you are sure you can afford the level of debt you are taking on. In addition, once you graduate, I would avoid a practice area that can be

easily outsourced to lower-cost attorneys overseas.

LP: Which law firm leaders do you most admire, and why?

Culhane: I recently spoke at a conference where I met Mary Wilson, managing partner of Dentons US, who was also speaking at Women's Legal 2020. I was impressed with her very genuine demeanor and the way she balances her practice and what has to be demanding management responsibilities. I joked with her that I thought I'd be her one day! What I learned from that conversation and what I tell women I mentor is "define what success means to you and go after that." Not every woman wants to rise to the very top of BigLaw or start her own law firm. Find what makes you happy and go for it!

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About Culhane Meadows – Big Law for the New Economy®

The largest woman-owned national full-service business law firm in the U.S., Culhane Meadows fields over 70 partners in ten major markets across the country. Uniquely structured, the firm's Disruptive Law® business model gives attorneys greater work-life flexibility while delivering outstanding, partner-level legal services to major corporations and emerging companies across industry sectors more efficiently and cost-effectively than conventional law firms. Clients enjoy exceptional and highly-efficient legal services provided exclusively by partner-level attorneys with significant experience and training from large law firms or in-house legal departments of respected corporations. U.S. News & World Report has named Culhane Meadows among the country's "Best Law Firms" in its 2014 through 2020 rankings and many of the firm's partners are regularly recognized in Chambers, Super Lawyers, Best Lawyers and Martindale-Hubbell Peer Reviews.