

Fox Rothschild Podcast

Legally EmpowHERed Podcast

Episode 11

Featuring Sahara Pynes with Dianna El Hioum and Lauren McKenna

Pynes: Welcome back to “Legally Empowered.” I'm your host, Sahara Pynes, and I'm really excited to bring this podcast to you. As an attorney and former business owner myself, I'm passionate about drawing on my own experience and insight to set my female clients up for success.

In celebration of Women's History Month, I want to focus this episode on the topic of women as leaders in both business and law, as well as what we can do to make sure that young women starting out today are able to see a path to leadership so they can continue to make history. To help me explore this topic, I've invited two of my Fox Rothschild partners who are truly distinguished leaders. Dianna El Hioum, who's based in New York, is the Chair of the Intellectual Property Department at Fox. She previously chaired the firm's Patents Group. Before law school, Dianna earned a chemistry degree from MIT and worked for several years at an international biotech company.

Next, Lauren McKenna is a senior trial attorney at Fox who is very well known in the Philadelphia legal community for numerous leadership positions that she's held through the Philadelphia Bar Association. Most recently, she completed a year as Chancellor, leading its 11,000 members during 2021. Lauren had previously served three terms on the Bar Association's Board of Governors, including a term as Chair of the Board. Within Fox, Lauren is Co-Chair of the Title Insurance Practice and Co-Chair of the Women's Initiative. She previously has served on the executive committee and will be our Philadelphia office Managing Partner starting in April.

Thank you both so much for joining me.

El Hioum: Thanks Sahara. It's great to be here.

McKenna: Thanks Sahara. It's great to be here as well.

Pynes: I want to start by asking each of you to share your own personal story of when you first started to think of yourself as a leader. What sparked that realization? Dianna, let's start with you.

El Hioum: I guess I'd say that I always had a real strong sense of self-advocacy. I'm not sure if that's exactly a leadership sensibility, but I think of it as something that leads into leadership. One of my first leadership positions at a law firm was just to be head of the associates, a class president-type position. I really enjoyed the ability to be a liaison with the partners to represent my peers and to have an ability to make things better, to improve the flow of communication, talk about concerns that people had and see

how we could resolve them. So, it was my own kind of sense of self-advocacy, but it branched out to then becoming an advocate for others. I think that's kind of my earlier experience in leadership.

Pynes: What about you Lauren?

McKenna: I would say it was a work in progress for most of my professional life. It's one of those things where you build confidence as you do things. In my case personally, I started to really become confident in my abilities in law school, in terms of leadership. I had roles in law school that were leadership roles. I saw the opportunity when I joined law firm life to do the same thing again.

Interestingly for me, one of the early ways of being a leader was not just in my practice area. I was one of the few women in the firm at the time, and that gave me a platform to help other women. And I still do that today. So, I would say it's constantly changing and expanding. I've enjoyed every minute of learning what I'm capable of in terms of helping other people and colleagues.

Pynes: Yes, I agree. It's a constant evolution. Sometimes you may have to step back depending on what's going on in your personal or professional life. Other times, you're ready to step up and take charge.

Let's travel back in time a little bit. I'm curious about what your mindset was at a younger age. Was there someone in your life, maybe a family member, or a teacher or even a historical figure, who was very influential in how you view the world today?

McKenna: Yes. I think at a young age, I was somewhat naïve. I thought anything was possible. I did think that as a woman coming into the profession that I would be joining a law firm in an equal number to the men. I thought everything was possible, and I think that was a good outlook. It may have been somewhat naive, but I think it was a good way of approaching things.

I drew a lot on my father. He headed a national corporation for many years and had really great leadership and interpersonal skills. I learned a lot from him. I identified a lot with how he conducted himself. Not only was he a strong leader, but he was humble about it. At the same time, I think that actually made him a better leader. So, he was definitely a role model for me. He's 85 now. He's no longer in the working world, but he still is a role model for me. I find myself doing a lot of the things that I think he would do, in terms of how I approach people and issues that I deal with for clients as well as for leadership roles within the firm.

Pynes: I really love that. What about you, Dianna?

El Hioum: Yes, I think that's great. That's going to be part of my answer as well.

For me, I grew up the youngest of four, and my dad owned his own business and he expanded it. It was a chain of auto parts stores in upstate New York. He worked very hard. I didn't even realize he worked six days a week. He later in life pointed that out to me. "I wasn't there on Saturdays. Don't you remember?" It was a blur, but you get bits and pieces of it. He was just always a really methodical,

thoughtful leader. He was very well respected in the community. I remember growing up, people always had really great things to say about my dad, whether they worked for him or were a customer, or just knew him in the community. He never flew off the handle or had something rattle him. His best advice, which he demonstrated all the time, was that he would listen. His advice to me, probably given more often as a teenager, was to listen. He really took in as much information as he could. He would make an informed decision, and he would move on. I think he had a lot of success that way. He was a really great role model in how to lead a team and expand the business and have some success.

I'm a patent attorney. I'm in the science field. There are very few women, historically, in the career path I've had, from a being student through today. There's always been a sense of having to balance the need to assert yourself, but not too much, to try gain respect of your peers. That's something that I really focus on. I think that goes hand in hand with the idea about a methodical, thoughtful approach. To not fly off the handle, to try to really listen, as I progressed in my career being in the minority, as far as women in the practice.

Pynes: Really important advice. Sometimes I feel like I talk more than I listen, and I know that's not a good thing.

I'm so inspired by you both and your leadership roles and all that you've accomplished in your practices. Dare I even say "EmpowHERed" by you both! The podcast is definitely living up to its title today!

For my last question, I wanted to get the advice you would give to young women who are looking to shatter that glass ceiling in their respective fields. Dianna, do you want to start?

El Hioum: I would say to not tolerate a position that wasn't acceptable to you. For women who might find themselves in a position where they think, "This is not where I want to be, either the type of work I'm doing, the people I'm working with." Don't tolerate that and subject yourself to that and think that you're waiting for someone else to come along to try and help you out of it.

I worked at a biotech company after college. I didn't even realize it at the time, but it was a good eye-opener. I had been getting minimal raises year after year. Then I had a supervisor who looked into that and said, "You've been getting minimal raises, but you're doing excellent work. I'm going to get you caught up on where you should be salary-wise." It was something I wasn't even really paying attention to, but it was that kind of thing where, if you're not your own self-advocate and you're tolerating other people taking charge of your career, that's not a good thing. You should pay attention to that and focus on it and make changes, because you can make changes when things are not lining up the way you want them to.

Pynes: Lauren, last word?

McKenna: Building on what Dianna has already said so well, is that the concept of resilience is critical.

For me, resilience is the watch word in terms of progression. Not every situation is going to present the opportunity you want, and it may not turn out the way you think it should. But if you're resilient about it

and don't give up, I think that has been, for me, a guiding principle in terms of how I've approached different things.

To Dianna's point, there are times where you can say, "This just doesn't feel right. I'm not really comfortable with this." You can be resilient about changing it. So, rather than just accepting, "Unfortunately for me it didn't work out," look at it as an ability to change and grow.

Also, ask for what you want. I give the example of when I was a young attorney here having my first child. At the time, I wasn't quite sure what that would look like for me. After returning to practice, I talked to the firm about what I thought would work for me, and the firm was extremely receptive to accommodating me. I don't know that I would have known that, had I not taken it on myself and been resilient about the situation and asked for what I was interested in. I see those points in my professional life as points where, if I hadn't done that, I don't think my path would have been what it is today.

Don't be shy about anything. If it doesn't feel right, if it's something that you think you have insights in, ask for what you want and share it thoughtfully. I have found, generally, people are very open to hearing. And, realize your value. That's the other thing. Realize your value. So, those are my parting thoughts on what I think any woman, young or old, should consider in terms of a path, in terms of professional development.

Pynes: Thank you both for your insights. It's been incredibly enlightening to me and I always love talking to you both. Thank you for being here and hope to see you both soon.

El Hioum: Thanks, Sahara, it was our pleasure.

McKenna: Thank you, Sahara. Take care.