



Pulling together

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Poonam Melwani QC on why a sense of community, mentoring & support are key to the success & happiness of young lawyers

In the first 100 years of *NLJ*'s evolution there were no female QCs. The first two were appointed in 1949 and it took another decade for that heady number to be doubled to four. When I was appointed in 2011, I was astonished to discover that I was only the 274th woman ever. And absolutely livid when I went to Ede & Ravenscroft to hire my ceremonial frock coat and breeches. Drowning in clothing cut for a man's shape which required multiple safety pins at the waist, my dismay was met with a comment of: 'Sorry, we still don't get many of you.'

I was never concerned that I would struggle because I was a woman or person of colour. To be honest, my worry was the other way. I hesitated to apply for silk because I thought that if I didn't get it, despite being a woman of colour and a mother of four, the legal world would chortle that I must be really thick. And when I did get silk at the first time of asking, I went for a walk and cried a few tears, upset that I would never know whether I was appointed purely on merit.

When I confessed these thoughts to the senior men in chambers they looked baffled, proclaiming me an idiot because 'of course you are good enough and deserve it'.

Which brings me to my point. I would never have succeeded in my career without the emotional and intellectual support that my colleagues gave me. We were a small chambers, we all knew each other well and we spoke and asked questions and helped each other every day. We were a community.

Chambers and law firms are much larger now and with the increased numbers, there is a real risk of feeling alone and unsupported. All the more so given Covid. The lockdowns have had some upsides; my

sons have learnt to cook and most people (male and female) have become more open about their emotional needs and difficulties with juggling.

However, as we face a new way of working, with more people wanting to work from home several days a week, the renewed challenge we face is in re-making our work communities so that we can both access and give support, advice and encouragement.

“Community transcends our own individual workplace”

Law firms, I know, are trying all sorts of things. Free breakfasts, nail-bar sessions, wellbeing seminars to name a few. In chambers, we have a new well-being and community initiative and have held women's workshops, regular lunches/breakfasts, weekly yoga classes and publish a monthly newsletter that is aimed at keeping us connected with each other.

There will be those who say they do not need any of this. For many lawyers, the last two years have been extremely financially rewarding with also the benefit of more time at home with loved ones and family. For some the lockdowns have highlighted that they can manage just fine, at a distance and without the wasted time of socialising and chatting and getting diverted.

My own view is that that is exceedingly short sighted. A huge amount is learnt from the chat over the boiling kettle, the

bumping into each other in the corridor where the events of a difficult meeting or the legal proclivities of a particular arbitrator are effortlessly shared. Pupils and trainees learn from real-life observation and the casual discussion before and after meetings, which cannot be replicated by Microsoft Teams. So while working from home is here to stay, the days in the office should very much not be 'I'm in the office, head down and concentrate'.

Community transcends our own individual workplace however. Mentoring people within the profession is key to its growth and success. ComBar launched an excellent scheme in November 2020, available to all members, aimed at matching up mentors and mentees outside the chambers relationship on different and specific areas of concern. Potential topics include 'moving place of business', 'juggling' and 'promotion' among others. A scheme like this sounds much more like something they would do across the pond, but what a brilliant idea that I hope is being used (see www.combar.com/mentoring/).

Last month a young female solicitor introduced herself to me at a party, enthused by Quadrant's informal Quadcasts in which four of us get together and argue about recent developments. (She had seen the episode in which I was wearing a Christmas Jumper with neon bulbs but had missed the episode when my hair was set on fire by a dangerous birthday cake.) After some general chat, she expressed her frustration that while her firm had signed up to various pledges, including to appointing more female arbitrators, this was all rather pointless if no one knew anything about the woman arbitrators on offer. 'We need to talk more and get to know each other more,' she said.

Being a lawyer is not for the faint-hearted. We all have a healthy dose of self-belief. But looking for help and support and encouragement is not a sign of weakness; and talking and sharing experiences fosters ideas, confidence and knowledge. I ended a recent article by suggesting that Aretha's anthem that *Sisters are doing it for themselves* does not mean that sisters have to do it alone. There is no shame in the legal profession offering and following Bill Withers' invitation either. If you need reminding, *Lean on me*.

NLJ

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