

How I Made Partner: 'Don't Dismiss Criticism,' Says Sara Alpert Lawson of Zuckerman Spaeder

"In some ways, making partner is like climbing Mount Everest: it's an upward journey that presents unique challenges for each person."

By Tasha Norman

[Sara Alpert Lawson](#),
40, [Zuckerman Spaeder](#),
Tampa, Florida

Practice areas: White-collar criminal and civil defense, government investigations, and complex commercial litigation.

Law school and year of graduation: University of Maryland, Francis King Carey, School of Law, 2007.

How long have you been at the firm?

Ten years. I was promoted to partner, effective Jan. 1, 2022.

How long were you an associate at the firm?

Five or six years before being promoted to counsel for approximately three years.

Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm?

My path has been unusual. After I graduated law school and passed the bar, my first job as an attorney was as the sole in-house corporate general counsel for an international chemical trader and distributor.

I served in that role for approximately 18 months. While I enjoyed the challenge, I knew that to grow and improve as a lawyer I needed to work for excellent, experienced attorneys. In 2009, I was fortunate to join the practice of an excellent white-collar defense lawyer, John Lauro, with whom I worked for three years before joining my current firm.

What criteria did you use when deciding to join your current firm?

I joined Zuckerman Spaeder because of the people, first and foremost. It is a special firm where you learn from and work with some of the best and brightest lawyers in the country, who are also innovative, passionate, and caring colleagues. Beyond that, I knew I wanted to work on sophisticated, varied high-stakes litigation and trials, and Zuckerman Spaeder checks that box many times over.

What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming a partner?



Sara Alpert Lawson of Zuckerman Spaeder.

Courtesy Photo

Thus far, the biggest transition has been moving away from being the person most immersed in the factual details and the legal research to being the person directing that work. That is, now I am learning to ask more questions than I answer, which is a different skill set. From observing high-level executives and my more senior partners, I've learned that asking the right questions, or simply good questions, is critical to obtaining the important answers that

move an organization or litigation forward.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you a partner? Was it your performance on a specific case? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people?

It is all those factors and then some. Sustained, excellent work product; strategic thinking; excellent judgment; trial and litigation experience; and developing meaningful relationships with clients and colleagues all factor into the decision.

What's the key to successful business development in your opinion, and how do you grow professionally while everyone is navigating a hybrid work system?

Taking those questions separately, business development requires nurturing meaningful, authentic relationships and making sure these contacts and friends know what you do. It is being a caring, thoughtful listener and willing to continually make new connections, including taking the opportunity to befriend your clients, co-counsel, experts, and even opposing counsel, when possible. Then, the secret is to maintain these connections as you grow older. As for the second question, we are all adjusting to this new professional reality and creating individualized, unique approaches

to developing professional networks and connections. For me, it's doing a bit of both: connecting with far-flung colleagues, law school classmates, and friends remotely and getting together in person, when possible. I serve on my law school's alumni board, and this past year, a friend and I started a quarterly virtual lunch with our classes (2006 and 2007). It has been a fantastic way to connect with folks we haven't seen in a very long time.

Who had the greatest influence on your career and helped propel you to partner?

Over the years, many individuals inside and outside my firm have had a significant influence on me and in shaping the lawyer I have become, but my now-partner [Cy Smith](#), in our Baltimore office, stands out. Cy and I worked closely together on a major piece of litigation for six years that we tried in federal court last summer. He is a brilliant trial lawyer, incredible leader, has a keen business sense, and is one of the most genuine human beings I know. Cy is the kind of lawyer I aspire to be, and his mentorship and sponsorship moved the needle for me in many ways.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner?

Don't dismiss criticism. And don't give up. In some ways,

making partner is like climbing Mount Everest: it's an upward journey that presents unique challenges for each person. But there are two things that surprise every smart, young, overachieving lawyer when entering the practice of law: (1) you still have a lot to learn; and (2) it will take a long time to be proficient, much longer than you anticipate after years of quickly grasping concepts in school.

What you need to improve may surprise you or may not resonate at first. Seek to understand the feedback and figure out how you can improve in that area. Read books. Talk to others. Engage in serious self-reflection. Work hard to get better. Being a lifelong learner and overcoming professional challenges is not only rewarding, it positions you well for future growth within your organization.

When it comes to career planning and navigating inside a law firm, in your opinion, what's the most common mistake you see other attorneys making?

The most common "mistake" I see young attorneys make is having a fixed idea of the type of work that they want to do and who they want to work with such that they turn down or fail to embrace new opportunities to work on different

kinds of cases, in various capacities, and for different partners. This hurts a young attorney in several ways. It limits the attorney's skill development and experience, making it difficult to adapt to changing work or client needs due to shifting economic environments (and things will change, they always do). It also limits the opportunity to develop new professional and business relationships. And it reduces the attorney's exposure to other partners in the firm, who at some point will be asked to weigh in on his/her candidacy for partnership.

What challenges did you face in your career path and what was the lesson learned?

I have overcome numerous challenges in my career path, both personally and professionally. To name one, I put myself through college and law school waiting tables, bartending, clerking at a law firm, working various odd jobs (e.g., going door-to-door for an environmental group one summer) and with massive student loans. Through all the challenges I faced, I always kept going no matter how difficult things seemed at the time. That attitude of persistence and perseverance has played an important role in getting to where I

am today and sustaining me for the challenges to come.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self?

Take time to enjoy life. Make weekend plans. For so many years, I worked every weekend such that "What is a weekend?" as asked by Violet Crawley in "Downton Abbey" (though in a different sense), became a frequent joke between me and my husband. I regret that choice because I can't get my 20s or my 30s (especially pre-kids) back.

What impact would you like to have on the legal industry as a whole?

That's a big question. There are many aspects of the legal industry I would like to improve, including the inclusion of women and minorities in law, protecting the civility of the profession, and incorporating more business and management training in law schools and within employers. Law schools and law firms teach lawyers how to think, but not how to manage, develop, and lead people, critical traits for productive working relationships and professional growth. The absence of such skills plays a significant part in the dissatisfaction, stress, and anxiety prevalent in

our profession, whether from lack of meaningful inclusion, to uncivil behavior, to poor leadership and management. We need to do better in developing the skills to engage in these difficult conversations.

How would you describe your work mindset?

Sometime along my journey to partner, I purchased a large canvas with the phrase, "She believed she could, so she did" in gold script and hung it next to my bathroom mirror as a reminder that everything I needed to succeed was within me. I would look at it every morning before going into the office, take a deep breath, and prepare myself for the day.

What firm initiatives are you working on?

My partners, [Adam Abelson](#) and [Caroline Reynolds](#), and I have spearheaded our firm's first formal mentoring program, in which we have thoughtfully paired associates with partners across offices to foster those critical relationships of trust and guidance that make a difference in a young attorney's development. This is our first year of the program, and we are looking forward to seeing the impact on the firm's culture, connectedness, and associate development over the years to come.