

How I Made Partner: 'Put Yourself Out There and Make Your Goals Known,' Says Natalie Prager of Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner

By ALM Staff

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Natalie Prager, 37, Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner, Miami

Job title: Partner

Practice area: Real Estate

Law school and year of graduation: University of Miami, 2012

How long have you been at the firm? 3.5 years

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm? When I made the decision to leave my prior firm, it was an incredibly difficult decision because I was very happy there but wanted to move to a different city. When I was interviewing for new positions, it felt very overwhelming at that point in my career (as a 7th year associate) who was a few years away from making partner. I knew I wanted to be somewhere with a national or international platform with progressive values, interesting and varied work, a supportive team and an emphasis on raising women to positions of leadership. After extensive discussions with associates and partners in the real estate group, it became clear that BCLP was the right place for me.

Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one and how long were you there?

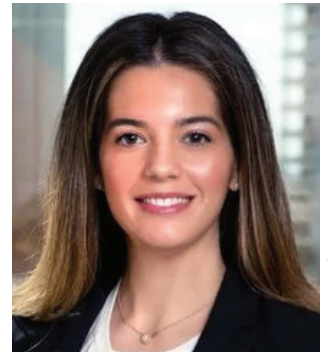
- Associate, Baker & Hostetler LLP 2.5 years
- Associate, Milgrim Law Group 3.5 years

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? Was it your performance on a specific case? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people? I think a lot of it has to do with luck and being in the right place at the right time. When I joined BCLP as an 8th year associate, there was a huge focus on promoting real estate associates to partnership, so the opportunities were certainly there for me. Once I started BCLP (2 months before COVID!!), I made it a point to hit the ground running, reach out to partners in various different offices and really market myself and my skills within the firm. I was lucky in that certain partners in my group, particularly Andy Auerbach, Matt Cudrin and Ron Emanuel, really had my back from the outset and helped me grow within the firm (and continue to do so even after my promotion to partnership). As to what was the deciding point in my promotion to partnership, I think it was a combination of right place, right time, my skills across many sub-sectors within real estate, as well as my "can-do" attitude. Developing meaningful working relationships with partners in my group also helped in raising my profile within the firm.

Who had or has the greatest influence in your career and why? Please provide name, job title and a brief explanation. Not includ-

ing those who I work with at BCLP, as a young associate coming up, my two mentors, Edward Milgrim (partner, Milgrim Law Group) and John Melicharek (partner, Baker & Hostetler), were invaluable in guiding my career. As a 1st year associate practicing litigation, I was deeply frustrated and unhappy that my day-to-day practice wasn't what I had envisioned (I always thought I wanted to be a litigator but did not enjoy the work once I started practicing). Ed took a chance on me and hired me as an associate and really took me under his wing and taught me how to be a real estate attorney. Other than the substantive work, he also taught me to keep things light-hearted when the deals get intense and befriend opposing counsel. To this day, I still lean on his advice and the things he taught me. When I joined Baker & Hostetler, I was eager to start working on larger and more complex transactions. John, who historically didn't often work with associates, also took a chance on me and brought me into my first hospitality deal. The work was so fun and interesting, and he really took the time to teach me and gave me a lot of autonomy and space to run deals. Getting to expand my practice into the sub-niche of hospitality not only strengthened my skills as a lawyer but allowed me to combine something I love (travel, hotels, restaurants) with my job as a real estate lawyer. Notwithstanding that I no longer work with them, we still keep in touch regularly and I feel grateful for their ongoing mentorship.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner? Always verbalize your goals to those in leadership. I think associates sometimes feel uncomfortable or that they are overstepping by making clear to partners and leadership that they want to become partner at some point. I actually think the opposite. For me and my career, I always made my goal of partnership clear to those I worked with. I think that it helped frame the narrative of what I was trying to achieve and also made the partners conscious of the types of deals they would bring me in on (in that they were invested in helping me reach those goals and growing my skills). I also think that attitude is a huge factor – the substantive work and skills can be taught, but being a pleasant person, willing to work on any and all parts of a deal (from the most mundane to the



Natalie Prager, with Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner.

Courtesy photo

most exciting), and showing initiative are things that, in my mind, are much harder to teach and can go a long way. I would also suggest seeking out a mentor in your group that can help guide you through your career and whom you feel comfortable having candid and honest conversations with.

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? Not trusting the process and not being themselves. Particularly in "Big Law," I think there is a perception that you have to be serious and uptight in order to be taken seriously, but in my experience, it makes the work so much harder. If you are able to be yourself, make your goals known, and find a mentor within the firm to help guide you, it makes the whole process and career trajectory much easier. I also think it is important to put yourself out there—everyone is busy and sometimes people need a little nudge. As scary as it is to put yourself out there, I think the rewards are great. I really believe that the partners at our firm are invested in the success of their colleagues (including the associates they work with). If you put yourself out there, ask for advice, make clear you want to be on a certain deal or work with a certain client, the answer is usually "Yes, how can we make that happen?" I also think it is important to stay humble, treat everyone as an equal, not feel "too senior" or "too good" for certain work and stay friendly. To this day, I have no issue putting together my own signature pages or doing other, more typical "junior associate" work if it is needed to get the deal done. I love when I see that same mentality in the people I work with.

What challenges, if any, did you face or had to overcome in your career path and what was the lesson learned? How did it affect or influence your career? This was really a personal challenge, but, as I mentioned, I was so focused on making partner that I put my personal life on hold in certain aspects. I convinced myself that having a child would delay my path to partnership. When I joined BCLP, I had mapped out for myself a timeline for having children, where I would work for a few years, hopefully make partner and then think about children. When COVID happened, my mindset changed and that timeline was scrapped. The lesson I learned is that as important as our jobs and career goals are, they should never get in the way of our personal goals. As a testament to BCLP and how seriously they take promoting women and minorities, not only was I put up for partner a year ahead of schedule, I was put up while out on maternity leave. My fears about derailing partnership turned out to be completely unfounded. Yet another instance of trusting the process but also trusting your gut when it comes to choosing the place to grow your career.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self? To trust the process. As a mid-level and senior associate, I was singularly focused on making partner and making sure I did things "right", and that mindset can be very rigid and sometimes self-defeating. I really think that if you do good work, make your intentions and goals

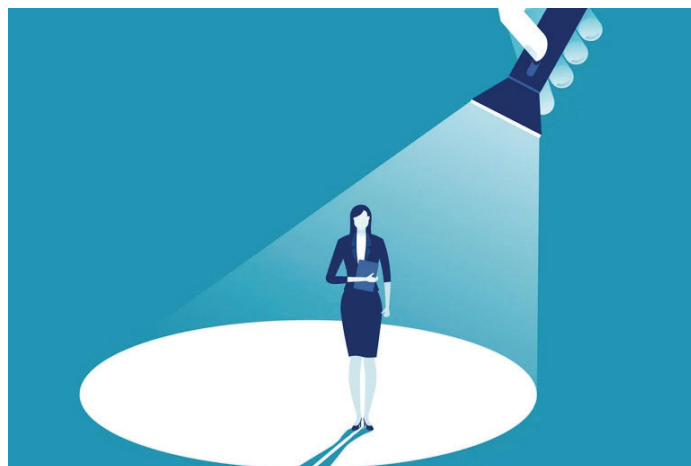


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known, establish a reputation for being a team player and someone that is willing to jump in, the rest will take care of itself.

Do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development? Outside of our firm-wide document management systems and other firm technology, I am not the most tech savvy. I do however try to promote our firm on LinkedIn by sharing the various initiatives and interest deals we are working on.

How would you describe your work mindset? Keep things light-hearted and fun—the work itself, the time pressures can be demanding, so I think it is important that everything else should feel easy. I also try to maintain a "can-do" attitude both with my colleagues and our clients. Again, the work and deals can be intense, so to the extent I can help alleviate that, all the better.

If you participate in firm or industry initiatives, please mention the initiatives you are working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve. I was appointed to serve as an HR People Partner within the real estate practice group at BCLP, providing support on the ground for people-related matters and projects. As a People Partner, I am accessible to all members of the practice group and provide a non-judgmental listening ear. In this role, I use my influence to offer guidance, tools, and constructive feedback as appropriate. I am one of three partners chosen by the department leader for this role and is the only female People Partner of the US real estate practice group. The scope of my mentorship expands outside of my own practice group as well. I am also part of the firm's global Sponsorship Program that matches high performing, high potential, and diverse associates with an influential partner Sponsor. As a Sponsor, I advocate for my associate protégé as they approach partnership consideration.

Outside of my official capacity as People Partner and Sponsor, I am passionate about seeking out informal mentoring opportunities to female associates at the firm and have a specific interest in women's professional development, particularly as it relates to female associates looking to make the transition to partner as well as navigating motherhood within a big law firm setting. I understand how important it is to use my experience and capital to champion the women around me.