

How I Made Partner: 'I Had Sponsors That Demystified the Path and Made Partnership Achievable,' Says Sepideh Mousakhani of Cooley

"The best thing you can do for others as you ascend the mountain is make sure that you are carrying others with you along the way."

By Tasha Norman

Sepideh Mousakhani, 35, Cooley, Palo Alto, California.

Practice Area: Corporate securities.

Lawschool and year of graduation: Santa Clara University School of Law, 2013.

How long have you been at the firm? I joined the firm as a summer associate in 2012 and returned as a full-time associate in October 2013. I was elected partner in November 2021, effective Jan. 1, 2022.

What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming partner? I have been most surprised by the outpouring of support and excitement both from folks internally at the firm and externally from clients and other professional and personal connections. While I expected that people would reach out, I underestimated how widespread and effusive that reach out would be—I even had clients cheering and clapping for me on Zoom video calls!

It has been deeply humbling to have those in my professional community so genuinely excited that I had reached this point in my career. It was incredible to see that they all felt and shared that success in the same way that I feel I owe my success to their support over many years in a multitude of ways.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making

you partner? At Cooley, the partnership process is holistic in nature, so I ultimately think the decision to make me a partner depended on several factors. If I had to speak to the most important of those factors, I believe the decision to promote me was rooted in (i) my ability to develop meaningful relationships, both internally at the firm and externally with clients and (ii) my leadership in the firm in areas such as diversity, equity and inclusion, training and mentorship.

I am recognized by my clients and colleagues as a business-minded problem-solver who remains calm in difficult situations and thinks creatively and decisively to efficiently solve complex problems. My commitment to training and mentoring junior attorneys, both formally through Cooley-sponsored training sessions and informally on day-to-day transactions and matters, as well as my work with firm organizations such as the Women's Initiative has been equally critical to the health and growth of my practice.

An emphasis on both efforts to improve the institution and excellent client service are a strategic imperative as Cooley continues to distinguish itself as the law firm of the next generation. I believe the firm will continue to value



Sepideh Mousakhani.

Courtesy Photo

contributions and leadership in both areas as they promote future generations of partners.

Describe how you feel now about your career now that you've made partner. I feel an incredible sense of accomplishment to have achieved this point in my career. Most of all, I am excited about what the future holds. I wake up every day grateful for the opportunity to work with clients and companies setting out to disrupt the norm and improve our lives. Having

made partner means that I can continue to build and expand a network of intelligent, dynamic individuals and be an important part of their strategic journey.

What's the key to successful business development in your opinion and how do you grow professionally while everyone is working remotely? Business development ultimately boils down to relationship building. While first and foremost you must of course have breadth and depth of experience so that clients can trust your advice, I've found that it's the ability to develop meaningful and often personal relationships with my clients that has made a tangible difference. If you are a person that clients can trust as you help them navigate complicated and often difficult business situations, and do so while relating on a human level, those clients will come to you time and time again as they move from company to company and will also refer their friends to you.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to partner? There are so many people over many years that have contributed to my promotion. As in all things, I owe the most to my family for being the foundation of love and support that has grounded me and enabled me to achieve that which I have. Without them, I would not be here today.

In my professional network, there have been numerous colleagues over the years that have taught me and sponsored me, but Jon Gavenman and Mark Weeks (both partners in Cooley's corporate group in Palo Alto) have been my most prominent guides. Since my days as a summer associate, they

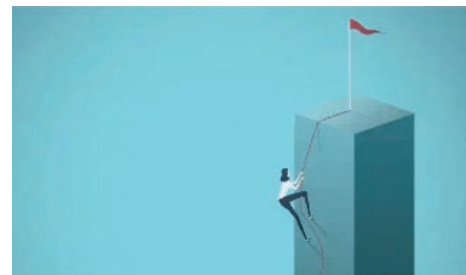
both took me under their wing and never looked back—looking out for and providing me with client and business development opportunities, putting me in client-facing positions and lending credence to my voice and advice to clients, and helping me navigate the many challenges I've faced over the years.

What advice you could give an associate who wants to make partner? My advice is twofold. First, be demanding of your sponsors. Find the people in your network that are willing to put you forward and give you opportunities and tell them (politely) at every turn what you need and want. Hear them out on their advice and guidance but constantly remind them of where you are trying to go and what you need from them to help you get there.

Second (as Jon Gavenman and Mark Weeks told me many times over the years as I profusely thanked them for answering my incessant questions), pay it forward. The best thing you can do for others as you ascend the mountain is make sure that you are carrying others with you along the way.

What challenges did you face in your career path and how did it affect or influence your career? As a first-generation immigrant, the first in my family to complete college and go to law school, and a woman of color in this profession, I faced a fair number of challenges in my career path—for much of it, I couldn't look around and see someone like me who could give me insight on what was to come.

I've walked into a conference room and been assumed to be a secretary, I've been cut off and talked over on client calls, I've



(Photo: Shutterstock)

wanted to work on particular transactions and not known exactly the right way to ask, and much more. While there were (and continue to be) some disheartening moments, I've most often viewed this position as a privilege and an honor.

My mom and my aunt are exemplars to me of perseverance, work ethic and integrity, and I have tried to emulate that in my career, especially when confronting some of these challenges, and everyday life. I was also fortunate to have sponsors in my career that sought to de-mystify the path and make it seem achievable, even most recently through the partnership process (thank you to Sonya Erickson and Ryan Naftulin, both corporate partners at Cooley, for the guidance on that front in particular).

What impact would you like to have on the legal industry as a whole? My sincerest hope is that in the years to come I will be able to help others in my position and from my background so that they have a sponsor and guide through the maze. I hope that one day I can tell stories about some of the challenges I faced as a memory and not a relatable story, and I believe that the work we are doing at Cooley to make this profession more diverse and equitable will help achieve that outcome.