

How I Made Practice Group Chair: 'Spend a Lot of Time in Listening Mode,' Says Cullen Drescher Speckhart of Cooley

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By Tasha Norman

Cullen Drescher Speckhart, 40, Cooley, Washington, D.C.

Job title: Partner in charge, Washington, D.C., chair of business restructuring and reorganization practice.

Practice area: Business restructuring and reorganization.

Law school and year of graduation: The College of William & Mary, Marshall-Wythe School of Law, Class of 2009.

How long have you been at the firm? Three years.

What year were you promoted to your current role? I was hired as a litigation partner in 2019, named chair of the business restructuring and reorganization practice in 2021, and appointed partner in charge of our Washington, D.C., office in June 2022.

Were you a partner at another firm before joining your present firm? I served as a shareholder and co-chair of the bankruptcy and restructuring

practice at Wolcott Rivers Gates for nearly six years. Prior to that, I worked as a law clerk for the Bankruptcy Court for the Eastern District of Virginia and as an associate in the restructuring and insolvency practice at a large firm based in Richmond, Virginia.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm to appoint/elect you to your current role? Was it your performance on a specific case? I think a confluence of factors led the firm to entrust me with leadership roles, some of which are closely related to Cooley's commitment to grow in a way that aligns with its core values. My substantive practice often involves situations of extreme controversy. I have always believed that there is a powerful role for kindness in the face of contention and that every adversarial circumstance is an opportunity for building relationships. I strive to carry this perspective in all of my interactions, and use it as a way



Cullen Drescher Speckhart of Cooley
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to deepen a shared sense of community in our office and in our firm. I am humbled by Cooley's unwavering confidence in me, and my goal is to be a good and enthusiastic steward of the opportunities I've received from the practice, from our colleagues in D.C., and from the firm's leadership teams.

What's the key to successful business development in your opinion? Going the extra mile, literally and

figuratively. Good business developers are always in search of ways to over-deliver on expectations in practice and in relationships. Sometimes that means boarding a plane and traveling hundreds of miles just to have breakfast with a contact; other times it means staying up all night with a nervous client preparing for a board meeting (preferably with pizza). I hope my clients and colleagues know that there's almost nothing I would not do for them, because it's completely true.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your current role? My hometown, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Both of my parents worked for Bethlehem Steel, which filed for bankruptcy when I was a teenager. Restructuring lawyers were a source of hope for a whole community (my community), because they knew how to save jobs and pensions, and they had the skills to find productive uses for the company's assets, which were key economic drivers in my town. Watching those professionals during my formative years, it was impossible to imagine anything more important or powerful than having the ability to save a company. And at age 19, I made a decision and plan for my own career. I've never looked back, and I've never wanted to do anything else with my energy. I absolutely love my job.

What's the best piece of advice you could give to a partner who is interested in leading a practice group? Spend a lot of time in listening mode, and don't forget that a leadership role is a service function. Turn up the volume, especially when it seems like there is only silence. I've found powerful messages in the things that are not being said by those around me, and I often ask my instincts to please communicate with a megaphone ("speak up, I need to hear you!"). They always respond, and they're usually right.

Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to yourself and/or what would you do differently? For a very long time, I thought that having success as a litigator meant exhibiting outwardly aggressive traits. I wasted a lot of energy as a young person trying to mimic behaviors that were not organic to my own sense of self. Confidence came when I finally found my own voice and style, which gave me the freedom to mix strength, grace and humor in a way that feels entirely natural to my authentic personality.

Also, I really struggled with the question of whether to have kids. If I could go back to those anxious moments knowing what I know now, I would tell myself that my daughter would become my greatest source of inspiration, and that I could never be more proud of my



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work and profession than I am when watching myself through her eyes.

How would you describe your work mindset? "Treat your partners as your most important clients." Also, "today is another day to excel."

What initiatives are you working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve? Practicing law at Cooley, I have never felt undervalued or marginalized on account of my gender. I have always felt entirely supported by my colleagues, who appreciate my unique perspective and unusual career path. I recognize that not every female lawyer has had the same experience, but quite a lot of progress has been made due to the relentless contributions of senior generations.

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