

How I Made It **Law Firm Management**

How I Made Law Firm Leadership: 'Focus on Your People Skills,' Says Jacqueline Newman of Berkman Bottger

"It is about being creative. It is about having the right team surrounding you and supporting you. The advice I would give to law firm leaders is to focus on your people skills, figure out what is important to each person at your firm, considering the impact (not intent) your words and actions have, and think a few steps ahead about how this is going to impact the team surrounding you. All of that, in my opinion, is more important than your originations and your billable hours."

September 14, 2026 at 11:00 AM By **Law.com Staff**



Jacqueline Newman of Berkman Bottger. Courtesy photo

Jacqueline Newman, 52, Managing Partner at Berkman Bottger Newman & Schein, New York, New York

Practice area: Matrimonial

Law school and year of graduation: Yeshiva University Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, 1999

The following has been edited for style.

How long have you been at the firm?

I have been at the firm since I was an intern in 1998.

Were you a partner at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one? How long were you there and when did you leave?

No, I have never been with another firm.

Were there any surprises you faced after becoming a leader at the firm?

One of the things that I found surprising and really amazing is that, because of the way that we hire and because of the people that are at our firm and what is important to our firm, everyone is so incredibly close. Even as we continue to grow, it is wonderful how people are still so close. I always say I do not want to tell people who to eat lunch with, and so by everyone having a say in who joins the firm, keeps everyone invested. What has really been a nice surprise is how we have been able to keep this family feel while the firm gets larger and we add multiple offices.

Some less pleasant surprises have been that no matter how much, as a partner and as a manager, you explain things to people and write these detailed emails, people do not read them and do not do the things that seem pretty simple to do. So many people do not understand the small things that are needed to run a business. The expression I use all the time is that they think “toilet paper just grows in the roll.”

What’s been the biggest change, day to day, in your routine since becoming a leader at the firm?

As our firm continues to get larger, and we now have 33 attorneys, three different offices and are moving into different states, I would say that I spend at least half of my time, if not more, managing the firm at this point. I have been very selective about the type of cases I am going to take on. I feel very lucky to be able to have that choice and be able to develop my two passions: the practice of law and the business of law.

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

It was really just asking.

The way that it worked is that I became an intern, then I became an associate. Then I became a partner, and the way I became the managing partner was that I was incredibly interested in the business of law. Both of my partners at the time were much more into practicing law. I went to them and told them that I was really interested in the business of law. I started spending more

time with our bookkeeper and our accountant and just really learning the way that the firm worked. My partners were perfectly fine with me taking over. So, I declared myself to be the managing partner.

Then the way I became an equity partner was really that the firm was so young, and it got to a point where they really could not afford to continue to pay me what the salary was. They basically said, all right, we need you invested. So that is how I became an equity partner. The way I became a named partner was that one day I said to them, "I think it is time for my name to be in the firm," and they said, "That is fine as long as you take care of it."

How do you utilize technology to benefit the firm, practice and/or business development?

Obviously, this is a question that if you ask me this in two years, it is going to be a very different answer than it is today. We are really trying to be on the forefront of the AI revolution. We have an AI committee and I have been beta testing many, many different AI programs. We are really trying to use technology as best as we can to make ourselves as productive and efficient as possible. We also are being very careful and have a cybersecurity consultant as well who is watching over what we do.

I think it is a fascinating time to own a business because of all the AI products that are out there and really what the future is going to be. How we are running our firms today will be very different a year from now, two years from now, and in three years we might not even recognize what we are doing today.

What advice would you give to someone whose goal is to ascend to firm leadership?

I think you really need to love what you do. It can be about the billable hours and the originations and all of those things, and obviously those are important, so I do not want to belittle them. But in order to be a good firm leader, you have to love what you are doing and you have to love your firm because if you do, it will be contagious, and that is what your people are going to respond to.

One of the things that is interesting about managing partners, and I speak about this for law firms specifically, is that we never get trained in how to be is how to manage people. We get trained in law school on how to be lawyers. We do not get trained on how to run a business or how to relate to the people in our business. We do not get trained on how to deal with difficult employees. We do not even get trained on how to deal with difficult clients.

Running any business, but especially a service business, your most valuable asset is your people. I believe much more in EQ than IQ, as leadership is about managing personalities. It is about being creative. It is about having the right team surrounding you and supporting you. The advice I would give to law firm leaders is to focus on your people skills, figure out what is important to each

person at your firm, considering the impact (not intent) your words and actions have, and think a few steps ahead about how this is going to impact the team surrounding you. All of that, in my opinion, is more important than your originations and your billable hours.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your leadership role?

I would have to give credit and thanks to my two partners, Walter Bottger and Barry Berkman.

Barry Berkman was my law school professor. I went up to him at the end of class and asked if he was hiring. At the time, the person working for him and Wally was leaving to go follow the Grateful Dead, and he said, "Come on over." That is really how this all started.

They had been incredible mentors to me and taught me so much. They really just let me be who I wanted to be, and they let me soar. I was a little precocious when I was younger, and they never stood in my way. I appreciate that so much because I do not think our firm would be where it is today, and I do not think my career would be where it is today, if they were not so supportive of all the ideas that I had and the things I wanted to do.

Knowing what you know now, if you had a chance to advise or mentor your younger self, at any stage, what advice would you give to yourself and/or what would you do differently?

I think I really like the way it all turned out, so I do not know if I would change that much. I probably worried more than I may have needed to, which I think is part of the growing process. Maybe if I did not worry, things would not have turned out as they did, but I do look back at some of the things that concerned me. I would have told myself to relax a little bit and that it is going to work out and you do not have to be as stressed.

I think I was always scared we would never get another client. Even to this day, when Jan. 1 comes around, I keep a list of all the new clients for the year. On Dec. 31 the list looks nice and long, and then when I start on Jan. 1 it is blank. Every year, I am told by my current partner that I panic every year, so at least now he is ready for it.

Do you have a prediction on how the legal industry will evolve over the next several years?

I think AI is going to really uproot it. I am part of a lot of managing partner groups, and this is the constant conversation. What AI is doing is basically replacing first, second and third year attorneys. What I am concerned about, and everybody is concerned about, is that these people are going to graduate law school and not have jobs because there is not going to be as much of a use for them.

But the problem is we are never going to get fourth, fifth and sixth years, which we will need, without having the first, second and third years. The legal industry is going to have to shift the way

it approaches training for young attorneys. Either law schools are going to have to make a major shift and really train these upcoming lawyers to hit the ground running, or law firms are going to have to consider the first three years of employment as a continuation of law school, which will mean that they will pay less. However, I do not see a future where law school becomes cheaper, so I am not really sure how that is going to be balanced. But I am very confident that the law profession is going to be very different in three years, if not sooner, than it is today.

What is the one behavior or trait that you have seen derail more leaders' careers?

Ego, and talking more than listening. I do not even have to probably expand on that because we are talking about lawyers, so I think everyone knows what you are talking about.

Please share with us any firm or industry initiatives that you are working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve.

We have what we call "BBNS University" at the firm, which is basically a monthly class that is taught by two of my partners. It is taught to all the associates, and it is also open to the staff. It is teaching more of the nuances of the practice than actual law.

For example, looking at a statement of net worth. A statement of net worth is where you fill out your assets, liabilities and expenses, and most people will just blindly enter that data. For me, that is a huge strategy tool. That is probably one of the most important documents that you do in a divorce litigation. I do not want my associates just looking at it and entering numbers blindly. I want them to understand the impact of the information they set forth. It is really about teaching them to think strategically in the context of the divorce.

We also have mentorship programs. Our firm structure is really having "the firm running the firm," so attorneys and staff have many opportunities to be involved in different aspects of running the firm. We have about 12 committees that anyone can join, ranging from the marketing committee, educational committee, AI committee, hiring committee, competition committee, social committee, etc. Having everyone's voices heard and doors open to involvement helps keep people invested. It helps them care. It also gives people a break from divorcing couples all day long and lets them learn more about the business of law.

The happier the attorneys and the staff at my firm are, the better they will be at their job. The clients coming to see us in a divorce situation are at an incredibly scary time in their lives and are at their most vulnerable, so they really need as much emotional support as possible. Therefore, the happier and more balanced the attorneys at my firm are, the better position they will be in to help our clients. Our clients deserve that.

Another personal initiative that my firm supports is a charity I started with my daughter called The Gift of Giving Store. The Gift of Giving Store runs in and around Mother's Day where we go into domestic abuse shelters and create pop-up stores so children who live in the shelters can “buy” gifts for their mothers for Mother's Day. The way the children pay for these gifts is with statements of self-affirmation.

It is a wonderful, wonderful project. Last year for Mother's Day, I think we gave out around 150 gifts. It was my 50th birthday present to myself, and it is a personal passion project of mine. My firm has been incredibly supportive of this endeavor. Last year, about six or seven of my associates came and volunteered and worked with me at a few of the shelters. It was a really nice support from the firm and also so great for my associates to be part of something that is incredibly meaningful to me and meaningful to the people they were helping.

The goal is to have a Gift of Giving Store in every domestic abuse shelter in the U.S. at some point. I admit it is a lofty goal.

I also run a group called the 2181 Alliance. I put together a group of female managing partners from law firms around the country. I interview all of them to make sure that the person is a good fit for the group. We meet once a month via Zoom. We talk about what it is to be a managing partner of a firm, specifically if issues relate around being women leader in law and I often bring in speakers who specialize in leadership.

The reason the group is called the 2181 Alliance is because there was a study that showed it will not be until 2181 that there are the same number of female managing partners as male managing partners in law firms. The logo is for the 2181 Alliance is: “We are not waiting till 2181.”

What career advice do you wish more people would ask you?

I wish people would ask, how do you deal with difficult clients? And how do you balance? Especially in the matrimonial world, people should ask how it impacts their family, how it impacts their marriage. I think people need to be more mentally prepared for that.

As a woman in this field, I have had two children and continued practicing throughout raising them. I totally disagree with the mantra that you cannot have it all. I would like people to ask me about that because I really do feel like I have been fortunate enough to be very involved in my children's lives and in my firm. I was class mom. I did not miss school events. I was at every softball game and every ballet recital, and I still was able to move forward in my career.

I do not like the idea that is out there that people cannot succeed in both areas of their lives. I do not think there has to be a sacrifice. I think there has to be a balance. It is challenging, but it can be done.

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