

## Why Guided Talks Are Key To Retaining Women Attys

By Tracey Read

*Law360 (June 6, 2025, 2:15 PM EDT)* -- Patricia Brown Holmes once had a conversation with a group of young partners at her firm on the challenges of being an aunt to a transgender niece, and of being a sister to that transgender niece's mom.

"My sister is going through a difficult time, because she now has a transgender child," said Holmes, managing partner of Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila LLP and a former associate judge on the Illinois Circuit Court in Cook County. "The child is going through a difficult time, because they're now trying to be accepted in their profession — they were male, and now they identify as female. And so, I was discussing my difficulties with that, trying to remember to call them 'they' and to call them by a new name."

Later, one of the female partners came up to Holmes and told her, "You just don't know how important it was for me to hear you say that you're going through that, because I have a transgender child myself, and I was trying to hide it because I didn't think anyone would understand."

Holmes shared this experience on Thursday during the first day of a two-day virtual American Bar Association summit in a session called "From Research to Reality: Leveraging Insights from ABA Commission on Women in the Profession's Resource Library for Inclusive Workplace Practices."

The session was moderated by Alexandria Lutz, senior corporate counsel for Nordstrom Inc. and commissioner of the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession. Holmes' co-panelists were Elise Buie, founder of Elise Buie Family Law in Seattle, and Betsy Miller, lecturer on law at Harvard Law School and special adviser to the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession.

Holmes noted that one of the recent recommendations from the ABA is to engage in guided conversations throughout law firms and across the legal profession. But the question becomes, what exactly is a guided conversation?

In Holmes' view, a guided conversation is one that's deliberate and involves a leader facilitating a talk in which people may be open and honest about what's going on in their lives — either in a group or on an individual basis — to help those with stressors that may be harming their chances of career advancement.

"So bringing what happens at home, what happens at work, what happens in fun, altogether and understanding that that's what makes you an individual," she said. "If you lead these difficult

conversations, it actually leads to the success of the individuals who are involved."

Holmes said guided conversations don't necessarily mean oversharing. They simply allow a person to be authentic and the opportunity to be who they are at work to reduce at least one of the stressors in their life.

She cautioned that there are missteps to avoid, however, such as digging too deep, getting too involved, telling people what to do or overstepping into cultural differences, politics and religion.

"A guided conversation is not an opportunity to tell someone how to feel, or what to think," she said. "It really is an opportunity to allow them a chance to open up, to ask questions, to be authentic, to be vulnerable."

Holmes added that it's also important not to overemphasize empathy when having these conversations with people.

"We don't want to get into a situation where we're empathizing too much, and then it becomes an excuse for the other individual," she said. "It's a balancing act, but it can be done. It's all about realizing that we're human and understanding the psychological safety that comes with being a leader who can be a bit vulnerable. Being a leader who can listen with empathy is really, really important to the growth and development of the lawyers with whom we practice."

Holmes said modeling good behavior is also important while not minimizing what someone else is going through. For instance, acknowledging that it's very stressful trying to take care of young children and be a good lawyer.

"It's OK to be stressed out about that," she said. "It's OK to need help. It's OK to ask for accommodations every once in a while. It's helping people to feel good about practicing law, but also to feel good about integrating their lives into what they're doing and helping them understand that there won't be repercussions or retaliation or even judgment."

Holmes said one reason having such conversations is so important is that statistics show that 41% of lawyers are women, but only 28% are partners.

"Having these guided conversations will help women stick it out in the profession," she said. "I've got several young women in my firm who had multiple children, and it starts to get hard, and so I'm right there encouraging them to do what's best for them, and what's best for their career. We want to see that 28% [female partner] number increase over time."

Buie discussed the importance of legal employers allowing flexibility for attorneys who are also caregivers.

"Traditional law firm models just don't reflect the current modern family dynamics anymore," Buie said. "Our law firm models are very outdated for the most part, and what's happening has historically disproportionately harmed mothers."

Buie noted that she eventually figured out — as a mother of four and stepmother to two — that the traditional law firm model was not going to work for her.

"I then started my own firm and became so dedicated to the idea of how do we create a firm that can really rethink law firm culture in ways that actually put caregiving as a very important part of the model," she said.

Buie's model for her 10-year-old firm is that attorneys can tell the firm how many hours they want to bill in a year, rather than the other way around. Another unique policy is that they've prioritized a shorter work week for everyone called "30 is the new 40."

"They're paid as if they're working 40 hours, but they get those 10 hours back to their life," Buie said. "Giving those 10 hours back to people has been literally life changing."

She added that the past notion of the consummate employee is just not reasonable anymore.

"We have this idea of an ideal worker being somebody who really is just always available, kind of boundary-less and really just unencumbered by caregiving," Buie said.

--Editing by Nicole Bleier.