



## Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

### Episode 55

[Jessica Stewart](#),  
[Lauren N. Russell](#), [Natalie Dallavalle](#)

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**Rachel Dikovics:** Welcome to the Lowenstein Sandler podcast series, the *Women's Initiative Network: Real Talk*. I'm Rachel Dikovics, counsel in Lowenstein's White Collar Defense Practice Group and a member of the Women's Initiative Network at Lowenstein Sandler. Before we begin, please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast series at [Lowenstein.com/podcast](https://www.lowenstein.com/podcast), or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, or SoundCloud. Now let's take a listen.

**Lauren Russell:** Welcome to *Coffee Chats with WIN*, a Women's Initiative Network series where we sit down with inspiring women to talk candidly about the choices, challenges, and moments that have shaped their careers.

**Jessica Stewart:** We're your hosts. I'm Jessica Stewart, and that's Lauren Russell. We're associates here at Lowenstein Sandler. In each episode, we'll share practical insights on risk taking, building strong teams, and navigating the early years of practice, along with a few personal stories that remind us we're all human.

**Lauren Russell:** Pour yourself a cup and settle in as we learn how today's guest got here, what she's learned along the way, and most importantly, how she takes her coffee.

**Jessica Stewart:** Hi Natalie. Thanks for joining us today. Can you briefly introduce yourself?

**Natalie Dallavalle:** Sure. I'm Natalie Dallavalle. I am currently commercial counsel at Public Service Electric and Gas Company. Most people know that as PSEG or PSE&G. And I've been in house counsel there since 2019.

**Jessica Stewart:** To start off, can you give us an overview of your career?

**Natalie Dallavalle:** Sure. I'll try not to be too lengthy because it started way back when during the financial crisis of 2008/2009 when we had that mortgage crisis. And really, a lot of law firms were cutting back just their jobs, their summer associate programs. A lot of us in law school at the time, I went to Seton Hall Law, were struggling of what to do. What do I do? How am

I graduating during this financial crisis? There's not many jobs to pull from, people were losing jobs, and it was very nerve-wracking. I actually began my career clerking. I saw that as a new pathway, something different to try, versus the traditional law firm route, at the suggestion of my friends, of the career counselors at Seton Hall. And I thought it was the perfect way to start your career.

I know a lot of litigators in general will clerk or your law firm might have you clerk at some point in your career. But I started out clerking in the Chancery Court in Monmouth County, New Jersey. And it was just a great way for me to get my bearings, get my feet wet, try being an adult lawyer in this big world. And it gave me that extra year to regroup and breathe as well, which was really awesome. And through my clerkship was actually how I found my first job, my first law firm job at a mid-size law firm. It was just through meeting attorneys who appear before my judge regularly. He would have these pretty large commercial cases where it would be the same attorneys appearing over and over again on some complex matters, or for their trials. And I ended up speaking to these people a lot. As the clerk, I was the one who they interfaced with. And I guess that was my first foray into building your network. Which I'm sure you get drilled on to do, to build your network and the importance of networking.

And I really think that was key, because I had applied to... God, I had a spreadsheet, and I could probably pull up this Excel spreadsheet. I could probably find it on a thumb drive, which will date me as well. But I applied to 200 firms, like cold. Anywhere across New Jersey, New York. Literally, whether they were hiring or not, I sent an application in because the market was so bad. And nothing hit out of all of that. And it was truly the connection I made through clerking that this attorney was like, "Oh, we have this position opening up. You should apply for it." And that's truly what got my foot in the door there. I realized cold applying wasn't the way to go for all of those jobs, but it was pretty difficult time and I was desperate. I was like, "I will try anything."

And I feel like I sent people my spreadsheet too, to be like, "Apply here. Here's my spreadsheet. How do you keep track of everything?" And I was at that mid-size firm, which was great because I was given the opportunity to, I guess I'll say cut my teeth, that expression. They gave me a lot of leeway as a young attorney to go to court, to go to settlement meetings, to argue my own motions, to take depositions, to have a lot of client interface. They put a lot of trust in their associates and gave them the chance to really get out there in the real world. Obviously, my direction was litigating, in particular commercial litigation, is how I started my career. Which, as I get to the end of it, changes.

But I started as a commercial litigator, from clerking to litigating at this law firm. And I was, again, lucky enough to get smaller clients at the time, oh, just friends, referrals of, "Oh, do you know a lawyer?" Then they come to me. And then, I ended up having a very, very small, very modest couple of clients at that time. But I think that's what helped me land my Lowenstein Sandler job because I got a cold call from a recruiter one day, I guess maybe a year and a half into that job, and answered the call. Because when I was at law school, I think very typical to many law students, my ambition was big law. I want to go to big law. That's my ideal thing. I want to be a partner in big law, that was my ultimate career aspiration. Many young lawyers, when you go into law school, that's what you aspire to do. And I was definitely set on that track.

When I got this cold call from a recruiter, I was already thinking about how do I pivot? How do I keep that career aspiration and get to where I wanted to be? I did have friends that worked at Lowenstein Sandler as well. They were already there as attorneys. This would be coming in as a lateral and I throw my hat in the ring, try this out, see if it can work out. And I guess I was close to second year at that time coming into Lowenstein Sandler. It was just that random chance of a cold call, even though I had been slowly exploring lateral positions myself, that helped me get an interview at Lowenstein Sandler and join the Lowenstein family was how I came into the law firm and "made it." I'm using air quotes, which I know people won't be able to see, but I made it into big law. It took a little bit of a roundabout way, a longer time to get there, but was able to achieve that goal for myself.

Then once there, I think what helped ultimately get the job, because there was a lot of people interviewing, was that real world experience that I had. I was ready to take steps coming in. I was able to write my own motions with not a lot of supervision. And that potential, which I think helped. And also I thought was very helpful was obviously having people who knew me at the law firm too, going back to networking, of having people who knew you and could vouch for your character. I think that helped greatly. And that there was that connection, even though it came in through a recruiter, that I had that connection as well. And I ended up spending the bulk of my career truly at Lowenstein Sandler doing commercial litigation under Gavin Rooney and others at the firm. which was a very broad range of work that I was able to do there and really sophisticated work in the litigation department.

I won't wax poetic too long of my time there, but it was a very pivotal time for me for my career and a really important growth period. I think that's where I came into my own as an attorney at Lowenstein Sandler.

You figure out what type of lawyer do I want to be? Who do I want to mimic? How do I want to take my career? Who do I want to be modeling yourself after or training under? And I think that was a very pivotal point of my career in shaping my future. I was at the firm until 2019. I was there for a long time, coming up to being counsel there right before I left, and coming up for partnership. And I think this is another key turn in your career of like, okay, here you are. Here it is. The door is in front of you. Do you want to be a partner? You've worked your whole career for this. Is this what you want to do?

And now I was at a point in my life where I was married, I had my first child. And time is very important as well, work-life balance, having a little baby. And I think the firm does a great job with parental leave in general. I was very, very fortunate. But I started to reassess what it was that I wanted. And do I really want to be a partner? Do I want to try something new? I really loved the client interface part of it. I liked the problem solving. I liked being able to help clients and learn their business. And that was very interesting, very appealing to me being able to spend time with just one client. Because in litigation, you're jumping in, you're solving the problem. And yes, a litigation can go years and years, but then when it's over, it's over. You're done. That's it. It's like, bye. You never see that client anymore.

And maybe you've spent a lot of time with them. Especially if you're on trial, a lot of time with them. And I wanted to be able to strategize and integrate into a corporation, which obviously completely changes the career path of becoming a partner. My first year up for being a partner, I didn't get it. And then the next time I was up seemed more promising. And at that point, I was already strategizing with my mentors and others of, okay, transitioning in-house and applying in-house to different jobs and trying that out. I know now I'm talking for a long time. But I think if you want to become partner or not, it's a really critical choice in what you want to do. And I was realizing over that year, year and a half period, I don't want this anymore, and that's okay.

And that was a very hard decision. But just understanding it's okay. It's okay that you changed your mind. It's okay you want to try something new. It's okay to confide in people. I then ended up applying for and getting the job at PSEG, starting there as litigation counsel. I actually litigated for PSEG for five more years. I litigated complex commercial matters for them, environmental matters, property matters. Still going to court but also overseeing outside counsel on large matters as well. And really learning the business, which I think took me a very long time.

For those listeners who don't know, PSEG is the largest energy company in New Jersey. We are in electric and gas regulated utility in

the state. We also own nuclear plants down in Salem. We keep your lights on, a little plug for PSEG. This is how you're listening to the podcast if you're a PSEG customer. We are an energy company for those listening who don't know who PSEG is.

I did litigation for them. And again, I really love the business side of it. And after, I guess at this point 16 years litigating, I was ready to try something new again. And the pretty cool thing when you go in-house, and at PSEG, is they allow you to pivot. I'll use that phrase again. They allow you to rotate, try different things, go to different departments. People get promoted into different departments. And a person was retiring in the commercial department and I was like, "I want to try this. I would love to try contract work." I've obviously litigated many contracts and been on many due diligence deals from a litigation and risk perspective but never drafting. And I was very fortunate that the company and my boss allowed me to do that, and encouraged me to do that, to give it a try.

That's where I'm at now. I'm a commercial attorney doing contract drafting, and actually SEC work for the company. I had litigated FINRA disputes in my career, now I actually draft a proxy statement for the company. And I do a wide range from energy contracts to procurement contracts and working on that for the company. It's very, very different coming up from what I did my entire career to where I am at now in the, I'll say mid, I'm not going to say latter part of my career, mid part of my career doing commercial work. And I do love it. And I think my litigation background helps a lot in risk assessment and strategy.

That's where I'm currently at. Very long story. Very long story to tell you of where I'm actually at currently of how I got to be a commercial contracting attorney for PSEG, versus starting out clerking or being a litigator. A couple different changes in my career have occurred, but I really like where I'm at right now.

**Lauren Russell:** Wow, that's quite the journey you've been on. With all of that, what do you think is the biggest risk you've taken in your career?

**Natalie Dallavalle:** I think the biggest risk would be, and I guess I alluded to it in my recount of my career, would be leaving Lowenstein Sandler and going in-house. Because that was my goal. That was my 20 to 23-year-old goal in my head when I started law school, which is a lot different than where you're at in your 30s or 40s. I think it was hard to say it wasn't what I wanted anymore to myself. It was very hard for me personally to leave that. Obviously, I know you can always go back. There might be a point in my career where I'm like, "Oh, I want to go back to private practice. I'd like to try this again." But I think I had been so set on achieving that goal of

getting into big law, becoming a partner. And I felt like, "Oh, am I disappointing myself?" I also felt like, "Am I disappointing other people?"

I, along with Lynda Bennett, who was at Lowenstein Sandler, helped start the women's initiative there. And I was like, "Oh, am I disappointing these other women?" I wanted to be a good role model and set the standard. And I had my first child to show, "You can do this. It's possible." And I realized, no, everyone just wants what's best for you, and you know what's best for you. It was hard for me to confide that my career goal had shifted. And then I was very afraid of like, "Oh, my God, are they going to fire me? I don't want to be partner, I want to do something else." But I obviously wanted to leave on my own terms, but I was very scared for other people to know. Which was so silly in retrospect. So silly to think that. Because, again, people wanted what was best for me. They wanted me to succeed. And everyone was happy to see that I was happy, that I was doing something that I wanted.

I confided in Lynda about wanting to shift career paths and strategize about that. That was a big risk for me. And it's all hindsight is 20/20 to see now, oh, that wasn't a big deal at all. That was totally fine. You were totally fine. But it's hard in the moment to understand that when you're very nervous about how it's all going to land. And then, obviously the second-biggest risk for me was leaving litigation at this point in my career, learning something new later in your career compared to earlier, being a younger associate. And of course, again, I understand I can pivot back. I can. You can switch what you do. But I think switching disciplines was another big career point for me. And also advocating for myself and, again, speaking up for myself of this is something I wanted, I wanted to try and taking that leap too and just learning something new.

I think most lawyers do crave diversity in what they work on, and constant learning. I think we're all probably this very similar mindset of we like to be challenged. I don't know. I don't know what's wrong with all of us, but we probably like to be challenged, I think. For me, it keeps me intellectually stimulated to keep working on new things and keeps me interested in what I'm doing and in my career. Those would be my two biggest risks for me.

**Jessica Stewart:** You are the queen of pivoting. We love to hear it.

**Natalie Dallavalle:** That's the word of the day, I guess.

**Jessica Stewart:** When it comes to building out your team, whether that's finding outside counsel or working with more junior attorneys, what's something that you look for?

**Natalie Dallavalle:** I think this is a good one because, again, it's one of those things you don't realize in the moment as you are a younger attorney. And I wish people had told me that communication is key, which maybe you've gotten that advice too. When I'm looking for outside counsel, and even people I work with, like your coworkers, I need to know where you're at. Give me the status update, tell me how things are going, show me the draft. Not to micromanage but just keeping me involved. I don't think there's such thing as over communicating. I don't need huge paragraphs. Because when you're in-house, writing is totally different and super succinct, you're not writing huge memos to your coworker back and forth. But for outside counsel, I very much appreciate that in a younger attorney, as well as meeting deliverables. Don't over promise, but don't under deliver as well.

If you say to your... If I'm your client and you're the outside counsel that you're going to get it to me by Tuesday at five o'clock, please get it to me at Tuesday at five o'clock. That's what you promise, that's what we're asking for. And again, if you can't, just tell me. But there's a lot of internal communication that I need to do that travels up the channel. It's not just me, it's other people that I'm also speaking with, and other teams in the business that I'm speaking with. It's very important to meet those deadlines. And I think even if you're at a law firm with your peers or your boss, obviously that's important as well. So, not taking on too much where you can't deliver.

And then, I always appreciate a practical approach, a strategic approach. Even as a younger attorney or outside counsel because being able to succinctly deliver yes, no, and why. Again, I don't need a five-page memo, unless I asked for it. But just being able to succinctly deliver an answer to something, I really appreciate. And in the business, you're constantly evaluating risk and let us do that. Tell me what I need to know so I can weigh the risk on that decision. And I think that's something younger attorneys can help to learn and do early in their career instead of, I don't want to say overthink it, but to be more strategic in their approach.

**Lauren Russell:** Jessica is a fourth year, and I'm a third year associate. What is a piece of advice that you wish you had at our stage of your career?

**Natalie Dallavalle:** I would say to find someone, a mentor that you can confide in. Or just a coworker or a peer that you trust that you can talk to about your career aspirations or what's happening on your day-to-day. And don't be afraid to say what that is. I guess my advice would be, don't be so scared. Because I think a lot of what worried me were things that I just could have openly communicated to people and asked for but didn't. I think it's important to just ask and advocate for yourself but have that go-to

person that you can bounce ideas off of, that you trust, that you can confide in, and that who also wants the best for you as well.

I think that makes a very big difference for you two. And even at your job, that's what keeps you there. That's what makes you want to stay. Or the people around you as well in addition to the firm and the work, but people who support you and believe in you. I think I was very guarded earlier in my career as a third or fourth year. And in retrospect, you certainly don't have to be.

**Jessica Stewart:** On a more personal note, where can we find you on an ideal Saturday afternoon?

**Natalie Dallavalle:** Well, now life is very different for me. I wish I could say brunching it in Hoboken or something in my younger days. But I have two young sons, so now my ideal Saturday is truly just spending time with my family, just being able to log off and spend time with them. We're probably bouncing right now between sports. But just hanging out and hanging with them and my family would probably be my ideal lazy Saturday afternoon. Even though having... I have two boys, so there is no laziness about it. They're very energetic and keep you on your toes, so we're always doing something. But honestly, I like to just be at home and be with them, spending time with them. I think that's our most important gift is just having time.

**Lauren Russell:** And now the most important question, how do you take your coffee?

**Natalie Dallavalle:** Well, I hate to disappoint you both, but I don't drink coffee. I don't drink coffee. I am a tea drinker. I'm a tea extraordinaire enthusiast. I'm one of those people. I take my tea black, although I will drink it English style with milk and sugar or with honey. But preferably, I just truly like the taste of tea. I probably drink two to three cups a day and need to dial it down on that intake. I love the smell of coffee, but I never got into it. I wish I could, but I am a tea drinker. I'm one of those people who you can take me for tea anytime, and I can drink it at any time of day. I wish I could say the caffeine would bother me, but I could literally probably have a cup at 11:00 PM and we're still good. I like a hot drink.

**Lauren Russell:** All right. Well, thank you so much.

**Natalie Dallavalle:** You're welcome. Thank you both for having me. I greatly appreciate it. And I'm always happy to see the future of Lowenstein Sandler, so it was great to be here with both of you.

**Lauren Russell:** We hope that today's conversation offered you a perspective you can use, whether you're charting your next move, mentoring the next

generation, or simply looking for a dose of motivation with your morning brew.

**Jessica Stewart:** If you enjoyed the episode, please follow the series and share it with a colleague. Until next time, keep investing in your growth in your community. And don't forget to tell us, how do you take your coffee?

**Rachel Dikovics:** Thank you for listening to today's episode. Please subscribe to our podcast series at [Lowenstein.com/podcast](https://www.Lowenstein.com/podcast), or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, or SoundCloud. Lowenstein Sandler podcast series are presented by Lowenstein Sandler and cannot be copied or rebroadcast without consent. The information provided is intended for a general audience. It is not legal advice or substitute for the advice of counsel. Prior results do not guarantee a similar outcome. The content reflects the personal views and opinions of the participants. No attorney-client relationship is being created by this podcast, and all rights are reserved.