



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

Episode 45: The Middle Matters: Leveraging the Middle of Your Career

[Megan Monson](#), [Rachel Moseson Dikovics](#), [Lauren Noval Russell](#)

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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 or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, or SoundCloud. Now let's take a listen.

Welcome back to the *Women's Initiative Network, Real Talk*. I'm one of your hosts, Rachel Dikovics, counsel in Lowenstein's White Collar Defense Practice Group.

Lauren Russell: I'm Lauren Russell. I'm a third-year associate in Lowenstein's ECVC Group.

Megan Monson: And I'm Megan Monson, a partner in Lowenstein Sandler's Executive Compensation Employment and Benefits Practice group.

Rachel Dikovics: Today, we're tackling a topic that so many of us can relate to, but we don't always stop to name: being in the middle of our careers. That's the stage in your career where you're not brand new anymore, but you're not quite at the top either. You're managing cases, mentoring junior attorneys, supporting clients, and still trying to grow yourself. It's rewarding, but it can also feel like you're constantly balancing competing expectations, leading and learning at the same time. But the truth is the middle matters.

This is often where we develop our leadership voice, our resilience, and our ability to mentor others effectively. But it's also where we see a lot of burnout, especially among women who end up taking on invisible work: coaching, checking in, and the holding things together for their broader teams. So today we're going to talk about what it means to thrive in the middle, how to make that space sustainable, visible, and even enjoyable. And we're really excited to share that this episode kicks off something

new for our podcast. We'll talk more about this later, but we're going to be launching a short series called *Mentorship in Motion*. More on that at the end of the episode. Now I'm going to hand it over to Lauren.

Lauren Russell: All right. So, Megan and Rachel, I'm so excited to get to talk to you about this. I view both of you as mentors and I think it's a really interesting part of your careers that you're in. So, let's get into it. Let's just start with how has your perspective on leadership changed since you started mentoring others.

Megan Monson: In terms of leadership, I think I've learned more about how to be a leader in mentoring others and that I can share perspectives of what I've learned, what I've learned from my mentors, and really just from practicing. It's really nice to be able to pay it forward and being seen as somebody who people can come to for advice, whether it's personal, professional. And what I think is really nice from my standpoint is because I've now taken on more leadership opportunities, I think more people then see me as someone who they can come to for mentorship.

Rachel Dikovics: I think people may also overestimate how senior you need to be to start mentoring people. I feel like as soon as you're a second year, there's probably opportunities to mentor people who are junior to you. And Lauren, maybe you can talk about that in a minute, being a third year now. But I feel like my perspective on leadership from whatever time I started mentoring others, and I think even before you're practicing, there's opportunities to mentor others when you're an older student in law school, you can be mentoring others.

But in any event, I feel like my perspective on leadership has probably been largely the same for a while, but I think it's that you should lead in the way you would've liked to be led. It really goes back to the core of treating other people the way that you want to be treated or would have wanted to be treated if you could have been. Like if you had yourself as a mentor, how would you want to be treated? And even if it's not somebody that you are mentoring in a more formal or consistent way, just how you conduct yourself when you're in a leadership position toward the people who are junior to you, I think often the work that comes out of those situations says more about the person who's leading than the other people who are on the team and how effective a leader you are.

So that's my starting spiel is be nice to people and treat them the way you like to be treated.

Megan Monson: And I really like what you said, Rachel, about it doesn't really matter how senior you are to be able to be a mentor, and that you really can start

doing that in all phases of your career. And I think that's really important because people sometimes think of mentorship as this. You have to be somebody really senior and have been practicing or doing whatever for a long time. You don't. If you know something that somebody else doesn't know or you have a different experience, share that. And we might get to this a little bit later, but I can even find myself being mentored by people more junior to me. And it's so really to Rachel's other point about treating people how you want to be treated, listening to people and sharing your experiences.

Lauren Russell: I think this really gets to the core of the practice of law is really a collaborative effort. Rachel, you mentioned once you're a second year, you get to start mentoring. I think that's really true. The first years come in and immediately you don't even realize that you know more than them. And I think creating a welcoming environment where people are comfortable to ask questions big and small has helped me feel successful so far. And I hope to continue to create that environment. I think starting to enter the role as a mid-level, I think it's interesting to consider what surprised you about reaching the beginning of this middle part of your careers.

Rachel Dikovics: And one thing I wanted to add Lauren, I know you said you could start mentoring when you're a second year, but when you're a first year, you get to interact with summer associates and you know more than them. There's really always, always an opportunity to be helping somebody else out. So, I was promoted to counsel at the beginning of this year, and I think what surprised me a little bit was just how much of a difference that seemed to make to other people. Even though I didn't think of it as my responsibilities changing, I was still on the same cases, I was still being tasked generally with the same things, but what I noticed most was that I was being given the first opportunity to do things like it was being assumed that I would handle the argument for a case that I did the briefing in, things like that, that I just was being offered these, I guess higher-level opportunities or things that mattered more instead of maybe being offered it if I did all the work. It was sort of just assumed that I would do those things, which was great.

And I didn't really think of it at the time, but kind of looking back on the year, I realized that I was moving into those roles more regularly.

Lauren Russell: So, Megan, for you, as you switched from associate to counsel to now partner, where do you see those shifts as your title changes?

- Megan Monson:** Yeah, so that's a great question, Lauren. I think it's a lot of introspective where I don't feel that my day-to-day is any different, but because of the title changes, similar to Rachel, the perception that others have changes. And I think back that I'm like, "Okay, how are people coming to me for advice? Have I really been doing this for that long? Am I qualified to do this?"
- Rachel Dikovics:** Should these companies really be listening to me. What do I know?
- Megan Monson:** It's a little bit of that imposter syndrome. So, I have to remind myself like, "Okay, I do know what I'm talking about. I've had so far a successful career, so if someone's coming to me, they do value what I have to say." And so being able to recognize that to me, I think was the harder part coinciding with the title shift.
- Lauren Russell:** Into the next question, understanding that you do know a lot and you have years and years of practice under your belt. Have you ever felt pressure to have all the answers when someone comes to you for advice?
- Megan Monson:** The answer is yes, but what I've learned is I am now comfortable to say when I don't know the answer, and I also have enough experience to be able to figure out if I don't know it, how I can get the answer. And so being able to have that confidence and that level of comfort has certainly shifted how I approach things.
- Rachel Dikovics:** Yeah, I've had similar experiences for sure. It can feel hard when you reach a certain level to have somebody more junior come ask you a question and have to tell them you don't know the answer. But sometimes that's the case and you may both be encountering something first the same time and you can figure it out together. But I think it's important to recognize that it's on you to get the answer if you don't know it. And it's not something that the person who's asking you the question knows when we're talking about a legal question.
- I think we often get approached about things that are not legal questions too, that are sort of soft skills-oriented questions or personality management questions where somebody has had an interaction that they don't know how to handle. And sometimes I've had to say, "I wish I knew what to tell you to do, but here are the options and you have to pick." And being able to talk through the pros and cons of how to handle different situations and think through what might happen based on each potential response, I think is something that does come more naturally the more senior you get and the more you've seen different situations play out. You can have a better sense of what would happen next based on any

scenario, but sometimes you have to figure out the answer, but here's some information that can help you do that.

Megan Monson: Yeah, and I think you're right, Rachel. It's having more experience is able to help frame that conversation and give some perspective and ultimately, right, it might be their decision, but you can share what your insight is.

Lauren Russell: Do you think that women do more of that bridge work? Translating, smoothing, connecting personality management than men?

Megan Monson: I certainly think so. I think as women, at least for myself, I feel kind of a pull to do that. And I feel like it is something that comes naturally as part of a nurturing nature, and so I'll say, comes kind of a default.

Rachel Dikovics: I think we tend to feel a little bit more responsible for how others around us are feeling and dealing with things and that kind of work, the smoothing, connecting, as you put it. I think women often feel more compelled to do those things to make everybody else's experiences more comfortable. I don't know that these are the kind of things we get explicitly asked to do, but I think they're things that you just kind of naturally do.

Lauren Russell: So, let's get a little bit more into the details of mentoring itself. I think as we've discussed, it can happen really early on in your career, and I think you can learn from both the people who are mentoring you and your mentees. Have you ever gotten a great piece of advice from someone more junior than you?

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah. One thing that I have really found is that my mentees build my confidence in a way that people who are mentoring me don't even necessarily do, which I think is really nice and I think is sort of this symbiotic part of a mentor/mentee relationship. And I think that as a mentee myself, I can also do that for my mentors because sometimes the more senior person in a mentoring relationship is still going to deal with things that are challenging to them. And if you are aware of them, it's an opportunity for you to kind of help build them up.

I've had some of the more junior women who I consider mentees and really close friends give me kind of reality checks about lots of things, but about how other people think of me is one that comes to mind. If I say, "Oh, I don't know if anybody really considers me an expert on XYZ," or how I'm perceived in general, a lot of times it's the more junior women who are telling me like, "Are you crazy? Everybody thinks you're an expert on XYZ."

And it can be helpful to get that kind of external perspective from somebody who is more junior than you, because I think we tend to be very critical of ourselves and think about ourselves in the most critical light that we can. But the people who you are mentoring sometimes can give you a check on that kind of mental negative feedback loop that we sometimes get into and tell you, "No, this is how everybody actually sees you."

Megan Monson: For me, I think another thing that's very helpful is for people who I mentor related to the substantive work that I do, understanding their questions or concerns can also really be valuable in shaping of how I teach, how I then do the next assignment to make sure that I'm kind of teaching in a way that's going to be responsive to their needs and really listening to what they're looking for in terms of opportunities or other things to help grow their career. So, it just are things that I then start to build into my practice and how I approach things.

Lauren Russell: So how do you balance both being mentored yourself while also mentoring others?

Megan Monson: That's a great question, Lauren. I think it's like anything else that I just naturally build it into part of my every day. And similar to networking, it's just something that I try to make a conscious effort to do. Now, I'll give you a real life example. So, one of my mentees, we have regularly scheduled check-ins. Now that may not work for everybody, but we have a standing date on the calendar to make sure that we have the opportunity to go over anything or to make sure that we're on the same page. It doesn't need to be as formal as that, at least for the people that I seek mentorship from. It's not that formal. It's more I go to them from time to time. But it's just making it, even if it's a self-reminder on your calendar to check in with somebody.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah, I think it does kind of happen naturally because these are just things that you're doing hopefully. In terms of maintaining your mentorship relationships I think it depends on the mentor because you may have multiple mentors. Some people who are perhaps in your practice group or in your practice area who you're working with every day may be great mentors to you, but you also may have people outside your substantive area of practice who are great mentors to you. And so, I think it's harder to keep those check-ins with the people outside your practice group current and to keep them updated on what you're doing and just to keep those relationships alive because you're not naturally talking to them every day because you're sharing all the same matters.

In terms of your mentees, I think it's usually in the same way that I'm talking about seeking out mentors, mentees need to seek the people in the middle out when they're serving in the role as mentor. And Lauren, for example, I know will come into my office and chat for a few minutes and is present. I don't even necessarily mean physically present, but that helps figuring out when the people that you want to see are in the office and when you see them, stopping by to say hi, but also just making sure that you're reaching out frequently, talking frequently, thinking of things you might have in common that you want to reach out to them about. Just keeping the relationships like current and alive I think goes a long way. And when you have opportunities to support each other, doing that.

Megan Monson: And I completely agree with everything you said, Rachel, and I think on the mentor side of things, being approachable, so knowing that your mentee can come to you whenever they need to and just having that open door policy.

Lauren Russell: So, what is one piece of advice you hope junior women can take away from your experiences at this middle stage of your careers?

Rachel Dikovics: That's a good question. It's hard to put a finger on one thing, but I think I would say whatever stage of your career you are at, you have insight that others want. I've found that sometimes the more senior partners sometimes feel a little bit disconnected to the junior associates and don't necessarily understand the way they're working or how they respond to certain things or whether certain systems are working for them. And I've had more senior partners reach out to me and ask, "What do the associates think about X, Y, and Z? Are they actually using this system? Do people find it useful?"

It's helpful, I think, to be able to bridge that gap, and I think that's an important role to be able to fill in the middle. But I think it's being in the middle, there's really also an opportunity to show people who are senior to you, what kind of leader you are by, as you'd mentioned before, managing down and up at the same time. If you are managing a team of people who are happy to be working with you, that reflects a lot better than people who are unhappy to be working with you or people who you are ultra-critical of publicly. We've talked about that a lot before. I think there are a lot of opportunities to show the people who you're reporting to what kind of leader you are by how you treat the people who are junior to you.

Megan Monson: And one other thing that I'll add is I think it's really important for the junior women to focus on building relationships both with their peers and with

those that are more senior and more junior to them. Because really all of the mentorship starts with building relationships and connecting with people. And so, at the core of it all, you build those relationships. People are going to want to be more invested in your career and your personal growth.

Rachel Dikovics: So maybe the biggest takeaway from this segment is that the middle ground isn't really so much a holding pattern. It's more of a proving ground. That's the time in our careers when we're building our voice, our leadership identity, our judgment, and those things are being more recognized by others.

Megan Monson: Yeah, I agree with everything you said, Rachel. The middle is really where you learn to lead with or without a title, and those lessons are going to pay off throughout the rest of your career. It's really a time to find yourself and flush out your leadership style.

Rachel Dikovics: It's like your thirties, I feel like.

Megan Monson: Yes.

Rachel Dikovics: Which happens to coincide with being kind of this middle ground of your career. But I think in the same way, at least for women that you maybe compare your twenties and your thirties, you tend to feel a lot more confident, I think, and secure in who you are in your thirties than a lot of people do in their twenties. And I feel like it really lines up with the part of you-

Lauren Russell: That's good to hear.

Rachel Dikovics: That you're at. We hope today's conversation helps you see this stage for what it really is, a time of growth, influence, and possibility. Before we wrap up, we're excited to share something new coming to our podcast, a special mini-series that we're calling *Mentorship in Motion*. In each episode, we're going to sit down with a mentor and mentee pair at different stages of their careers to talk about how those relationships start, how they evolve, and how both sides grow in the process.

We'll explore what works, what doesn't, and the real moments that make mentorship so powerful. So, stay tuned for *Mentorship in Motion* launching soon right here on the *Women's Initiative Network: Real Talk*. We'll see you next time.

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