



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

Episode 54

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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.

Jennifer Delgado: Welcome to the latest episode of *Real Talk*. Today we're talking about the art of reinventing yourself, how to stay nimble, continue learning, and build judgment in a world that's changing rapidly. I'm Jennifer Delgado, a partner in Lowenstein's Business Litigation group.

Claire Dronzek: And I'm Claire Dronzek, an associate in Lowenstein's Emerging Companies and Venture Capital group. We are joined by a very special guest, Stephanie Argentine, the Chief People Officer of Centivo, where she serves on the executive leadership team. Stephanie, thank you so much for joining us.

Our first question, you started your career in law and are now Chief People Officer and Head of Legal Affairs. When did you first realize early in the practice of law that your career might not look exactly as you imagined?

Stephanie Argentine: I think "realized" is a tricky word in this context. I don't know if there was ever really a realization so much as there was an understanding that I had tried a bunch of stuff prior to law. I'd been a math major, I graduated speech pathology, and then I went to law school. I enjoyed being at a small firm. I enjoyed being at a larger firm. But when I took the job, I realized I was incredibly bored practicing law. And I weirdly struggled with things practicing while I was a malpractice insurance defense attorney about the lack of accountability, the fact that I couldn't fix anything. I was just putting problems back in their boxes after the fact. And all I could do was have money change hands. So, I tried being a

confidential law clerk and found I was bored again. I worked for a judge in federal court.

And so, I don't know as I ever really realized it so much as I kept trying to get closer to something that felt right and I guess iterating on options and then eventually ended up deciding to go and get my MBA super late in life. I got a fellowship. I decided to quit my job, and then I found out I was pregnant with kid number two.

Claire Dronzek: As you made all of these pivots that you've discussed, did anyone encourage you to make those pivots or did all of these understandings and moves that you wanted to make come purely from within yourself?

Stephanie Argentine: Oh, geez. Well, there was definitely an encouragement by the recruiter in the MBA program. I think he may have had a little self-interest. Later on, maybe I'll tell a little bit deeper the story. After I graduated from MBA school, my husband wasn't super excited about relocating because he wasn't convinced I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up. So I don't know if Dave was necessarily encouraging me as maybe tolerating who he understood I was and what I was going to do anyway.

But I think I lost the thread of the question a tiny bit, Claire. It was just what I was going to do. There was really no encouragement by anybody or outward resistance.

Jennifer Delgado: I think it's very interesting that you not only pivoted early on in your career, but you pretty quickly pivoted out of practicing the law. I think at times you've sort of dipped your toe back in, but it's interesting as a lawyer to think about doing something that puts you in a business role or at least in a role where you are not practicing law. Reinvention, I think, can feel risky anyway, but as you become more senior, it feels like almost a change of identity.

How did you get the confidence to expand beyond a traditional legal role, having set yourself up to graduate from law school and be a lawyer?

Stephanie Argentine: Yeah, I don't know. I don't think of it as being something that took confidence, Jennifer. I imagine it did, but that wasn't the feeling that I had at the time. I think for me, I started out in the wrong discipline within law. I started out as a litigator, and when I think back really far, I didn't really enjoy my litigation related coursework in law school. I loved law school, but the courses I loved were all commercial and everything from real estate finance and gratuitous transfers. And UCC was ridiculously cool. I don't know why. But I think the takeaway from that is not so much that I picked the wrong discipline in law, but that there was this insatiable curiosity and sort of log rolling of what I had learned and how I might

integrate that into something else next. And so, creating options and not feeling like I had closed doors, I think is probably something that was helpful to me as I thought about switching.

Jennifer Delgado: That is a really interesting way of thinking about it. Were you also thinking about risk as you transitioned away from practicing law and how did you evaluate risk?

Stephanie Argentine: So, I was offered partnership at the law firm I was at before I left to become a confidential law clerk. So, there was almost something that was not so much seeking risk as avoiding being stuck. At that point, I realized I didn't love it enough that if I took that step to become partner there, that I was choosing something that was going to make it harder in some ways to do something else differently. And it was weird because I really liked practicing at that firm with those people, but I didn't like that work. And so for me, I think it's just weird. I think I haven't heard of anybody else that's turned down partnership. And it wasn't big, fancy partnership, don't get me wrong. I wasn't going to be some partner like you're a partner, Jennifer. This was a small insurance defense firm. We were really good, but it wasn't anything big and fancy by any stretch of the imagination.

But I just realized, I guess I was close enough to knowing in my heart that it wasn't all that I wanted to do and it wasn't close enough to sort of lock down and double down there. And there's a couple books, I think we've got a topic of conversation we might get to next around ways to think about your career. And there's some really good books that talk about creating opportunity and divergence before you start converging on things. And I think I was intuitively doing that kind of thing with my career.

Claire Dronzek: So many people might view reinvention as a one-time pivot while others, like yourself, view it as something you practice continuously. What would be your best piece of advice for someone who is feeling stuck, like you just mentioned, and wanting to take the leap of faith to evolve into a new role that may be related or completely unrelated to what they're doing now and related to that, do you have any lessons learned that you would want to share?

Stephanie Argentine: Yeah, I just met with somebody. So I meet people for coffee twice a week and we could talk about that as part of my networking strategy and how I started doing that. We can revisit that later. But just last week I was having one of these coffee conversations and the person was pursuing certain career opportunities. And when they got up that morning, they had this aha that maybe they were heading down the wrong path. And one of the things that we talked about having her do

was to take a path through her life, and I'm visually drawing kind of a winding path in the air as we sit here on a podcast without any visual signals. When we think of our resume, we think of a linear chronology and it's lined up and there's a linearity to it. What I was encouraging her to do is instead of thinking that linear path, there's a thread that winds through everything each of us has done.

And when I talk to executive candidates when I'm doing interviewing, I ask them about what is their superpower. Each of us has a superpower and each job has warts to it that are not appealing. And what I encouraged her to do is think through each of her roles on that curvy path. And instead of thinking about the linear chronology of them and the skills she built, think about what was feeding her superpower and what was a dissatisfier and a wart. And so, if you're really stuck, trying to think of your career that way might get you closer to where your real heart and passion is, and that might be helpful.

The other thing I can't recommend enough is just talking to other people, diversity and breadth after you've done some of that self-reflection, sort of running it up against other people and saying, "Here's what I've done, here's what I'm thinking about," and letting other people sort of question you and probe a little bit on what that might look like.

Jennifer Delgado: I think that's really good advice, Stephanie. And I often find myself going to the same people when I really need that reality check because there are people that you know you'll go to and they'll be very polite and they'll let you talk. And then there are others that are really skilled at revealing the mirror. And those are the people that you need to talk to sometimes because sometimes the answer is right there. You just need someone to draw it out of you.

Stephanie Argentine: Absolutely.

Jennifer Delgado: So, we've talked a lot about reinvention and your path, but what we really haven't talked about is what you do right now. What is your current role like? What is your day-to-day? And I'm going to then say the word that no one can avoid saying these days, which is AI, or I guess that's two words, but I think it's important to understand what you do now. And then I really want to talk about how that's causing your role to evolve.

Stephanie Argentine: Yeah. So, I have two roles at Centivo. I was hired, I guess, about six years ago almost to be the Chief People Officer of the company. So people is used when you're thinking particularly progressively about the HR function. I think of a continuum from personnel to human resources to people. So, I'm the Chief People Officer. We had hired a general counsel. I actually did the search and she stayed with us for a little over a year, and then she moved on and took another great opportunity for

her. I was having lunch with our CEO, Ashok, thinking we were going to talk about opening another search and Ashok said, "Well, how about we double you up?"

I've been calling myself a recovering lawyer for probably 20 years. I left the practice, stayed licensed, but really, as you put it, Jennifer, it only dabbled representing myself on a speeding ticket sort of stuff, writing a letter for a friend using J.D. after my name at the bottom of it, I mean, really not practicing. And so, Ashok has said, "I'd rather double you up," which was not something that was in the realm of my thought on what would be next to my career at all at that time. So, I spanned both people and legal. And I think one of the things that we talked about as we were thinking about doing this podcast, I don't know as I've ever encountered anybody that was a lawyer that had spent their career as a people executive and then added the law as part two. Usually when you encounter somebody like me that's doing both, it's at a company where they were serving in a legal role and they thought of the people function as sitting neatly within that sort of risk sort of realm.

And so, I'm kind of an anomaly in the direction at which I combined those two pieces, which is interesting because I find myself in the legal role having an entirely different style. In a people conversation, I'll be completely comfortable with a wide ranging, evolving, messy sort of conversation. If I'm in my legal role, I can find myself getting really prickly when somebody's not presenting me a legal question with a legal answer. And so, it's a weird aha in terms of how I think of and approach the two roles. When I think about the part of your question related to AI, I am doing work in both of those domains from an AI standpoint on the legal side around governance and risk and privacy and security and documenting what we're doing.

But on the people side, it's more about how's this going to change jobs? What parts of your job are now being done by an agent? So Jennifer, if we took your job and divided up into four parts, the part that you're still doing personally, do you have an agent Jen, an agent Ni and an agent Fer that's doing parts of your job? And do they need to have job descriptions? Do they report to you? Do you do QA on them rather than performance management and all of those types of things in terms of how do we take jobs and repackage them?

And then if you really get me going, you get me going on things like labor economics and what is this going to do to, as human beings, how we think of the meaning of work and our purpose and belonging and our identity, as you alluded to before. So, some of those big sort of questions around AI changing our jobs.

Jennifer Delgado: How do you think AI has already changed your leadership style? And that's a little bit loaded because I assume it has and perhaps it hasn't. But assuming it has, what about AI has changed it and in what way?

Stephanie Argentine: Yeah, I hadn't thought until you asked that question that it may have changed my leadership style. I'm not sure it has yet. I do think that it's causing me to push my team and think about pushing the company in terms of we need to be thinking about how we do this. And in the past month or so, we've had a bit of an aha that there's two planks to really our AI evolution as a company. There's the vendor and the infrastructure and the technology plank, which is owned by technology. And then there's the productivity, capability, individual skills piece that I think is owned by people. And I think that's something that's just become more clear internally and then more broadly across multiple organizations in the past. I know there's been a big shift in the past six months or so.

To answer your question, Jennifer, I don't feel it's changed my leadership style yet, but I'm going to have to think more deeply on that because you're probably right.

Jennifer Delgado: Well, this is a related question. We're in a world now where information is abundant and answers are easy to access, whereas before you might've sent outside counsel to perform some really deep legal analysis and you would've received a very thorough memorandum from them. Those sorts of things may not always be necessary. What becomes more valuable for lawyers or anyone really in that environment where the answers are easy to access? And so, we all have to figure out how we're going to remain valuable to our clients and to the world.

Stephanie Argentine: Yeah. I was just talking to somebody the other day. There's that joke about, I think it's been used both with artists and craftspeople in terms of charging X for Y when it only took five minutes, and it took me five minutes and 20 years. And so, I think the answer to that question is, I think those of us that are experiencing it now are having a different opportunity and experience than those that are entering their careers or will be entering their career shortly. Because I think the superpower and benefit that we bring to it is wisdom and judgment and synthesis and application and what now and all of those types of things. I think about, and I've got four kids, they're between 21 and 28. And I think about the folks that are in high school and college now. And that, I think it's a trickier question because as we have this huge enabling technology that gives us answers so quickly and so rapidly, how and where do we develop that wisdom and that judgment and that pattern recognition?

And I think there'll be a little bit of a two paths that people take. I think some of us are wired for synthesis and pattern recognition, and we'll

need fewer reps to still be able to apply that judgment and wisdom. And some of us get that wisdom and judgment by multiple reps and we need lots and lots of reps. And so I think getting a sense of how do you recognize and understand patterns because that's where the synthesis and the value add is when the volume of processing of information can be done by tools that are enabling that.

Claire Dronzek: Moving away from AI and onto a similar topic that you just mentioned, repetition and building judgment from repetition, a lot of young professionals will look at someone like you who has had various career opportunities in your life and you've ended up a leader in almost all of these roles. I think younger professionals would be really curious to hear about if they're having trouble finding these opportunities to build their judgment through repetition, what can they do to build strong instincts? What can they do to position themselves and set themselves apart to one day be a leader?

Stephanie Argentine: Yeah, that's a great question. I think we've always encouraged folks to do volunteer opportunities. I think as lawyers, we've got this huge opportunity and Lowenstein is enormous in this area in your guys' pro bono efforts. I didn't think this question was a setup for that, Claire, but it occurs to me, that's a really low risk way to get reps. And it's an area where the clients are not going to be expecting some sort of billing ratio of value to how much effort you're putting into it and those types of things. And so I think it's mind-blowing to think about how this might really enable huge pro bono opportunities and then I start projecting further out. And when we think about how this might change jobs and work and whether we might have basic income at some point, all of the renaissance things that that could enable for us. Think about if we had basic income and people can be social workers and teachers and artists and do nonprofit work and all of that and be able to keep their basic income because we have this huge windfall of productivity in us as a society.

So, I think there are some huge opportunities as well, but I got a little off-topic with your question, Claire.

Claire Dronzek: No, that's great. And I think it's a good transition to our next topic, which is investing in yourself. What does investing in yourself look like to you? And when you've made career pivots in the past, how have you changed your way of investing in yourself and reinvented yourself in different areas?

Stephanie Argentine: The major reinvention that I did was the switching from law to human resources, and that was largely enabled by going back and having a credential because that signals to people that A, you've made the

investment and B, you're serious. I think it can be difficult to signal to people your amount of desire to do a reinvention. And so, things that you can do that are concrete, that signal that I think are really helpful. I think the other thing that I've done, and I stumbled into it, my first HR job, I started after I graduated from MBA school, and the CEO of that hospital system decided he was moving on shortly after I started, which left me exposed, which then left me unemployed shortly after that. And I started having coffee, and my goal in having coffee with people was to network, not to seek a job, but just to start to talk to people and with the idea that things might evolve.

And so, in each conversation, I was working on getting two conversations. It was a deliberate job search strategy. And once I found a job, I kind of stopped doing that as deliberately with that focus, but I kept up the coffee appointments because they fed my curiosity and they allowed me to pay it forward to people as well. And so, I continue to have coffee two days a week. So, I think to your point, Claire, concrete signals and then networking and log rolling conversations, I think is a great strategy.

Claire Dronzek: I think it's a great strategy as well. And I'm curious to hear about how your efforts and networking have led to either formal or informal mentorship opportunities, whether you being the mentor or the mentee.

Stephanie Argentine: I approach almost every one of my coffee conversations as a opportunity to have a conversation with somebody about a problem that one of us is having because what's life, if not a series of problems we're trying—I mean, they're not problems in the negative connotation, but that's what life is. That's all it is: the working through stuff on a day-to-day basis and getting up and doing it again. So, each conversation usually has a problem or somebody's thinking about something and the process of talking to someone, as Jennifer alluded to earlier, can help clarify something usually for both parties.

And so I don't know as I thought about it as mentor and mentee, Claire, because I think each party takes on both roles in that conversation and some of them have continued and I'll have coffee with somebody a couple months apart and sometimes it's a one and done sort of conversation, but it's a great thing to do and I'd encourage people to do it.

Jennifer Delgado: On a different note, I wonder whether over time, Stephanie, you've made a decision to invest in certain career development or skill development and shed your attempt to develop other skills. So, in other words, maybe there are things that you know you're really good at and it's worth investing in those things, and there are other things that you

just feel are less important and/or just not your thing. How do you decide what to invest in given there's only limited time in the day?

Stephanie Argentine: I had a boss that had a saying that I have kept with me since that time. And the saying is it's like teaching a pig to sing. It annoys you and it frustrates the pig. So, there are certain things, maybe from a skill standpoint, that I'm never really going to get any better at. If you think about the Gallup Strength Finder model, the idea is there are strengths, talents that we have that when we work on them become strengths and there are non-strengths that you could put almost infinite effort against them and you're not going to become any more than marginally better at them.

And so, I think for most of us, it gets into that superpower thing that we talked about earlier. So, there's a lot of ways to try to figure out what your superpowers are, that exercise about that path and that curvy process that we each take through our career, a couple of books that might be helpful, the Gallup's StrengthsFinder assessment might be helpful. All of those things help you get a clearer picture on what is it that you're uniquely good at. And you'll know you're onto something when somebody says, "Well, of course you're good at that. You're weirdly bizarrely really good at that." Other people see it more easily than we do, usually because we can't think of not being able to do it. Those are the things to invest in. Those are the things that the research shows. If you put effort and work developing them, you get out-sized returns of being even better and better and better at them.

So, think about those superpowers, work on those deliberately, figure out what your equivalent of teaching a pig to sing is, and maybe don't spend quite as much time on that, especially as you get later in your career. It's a lot easier later in your career to decide to stop working on stuff.

Jennifer Delgado: Yeah, I'm thinking about my reviews from early on and there'd be a discussion about the things that were going very well and the areas for improvement. And I guess over time what you're saying is there are some areas for improvement that are just not going to get that much better despite excessive effort in trying. I think that that's really, really important advice.

Stephanie Argentine: Yeah, very much so. For me, I probably have more than a few examples of people finding me strong-willed. I work for a French company. I remember getting an email by accident that somebody called me [French 26:40]. I've been even recently kind of a little bit brassy and it's like, "Yeah, that's me. I'm 58. It's not going to change much at this point, so I'm just kind of turning it into a superpower instead." I think those of

us that are later in our career have the luxury and ability to think deliberately about what are the things that we are going to leverage as our strengths and what are the things that we're going to back burner is not practicing getting better at them much anymore. I would say if you're early in your career, be careful about that because I think that one of the things that can be a double-edged sword is if we think about, well, this is authentically me, we can sometimes use that as a defense shield against getting better at things that we actually need to get better at.

And until you've got some reps under your system with your own career and your skillset, think about that diverging piece. You want to get better at more things, you want to try more things, you want to test out things and feel them out before you abandon them as not areas of focus. And if you don't push yourself through those learning experiences, you won't know whether you really can get better at it or not.

So, all joking aside, Jennifer, you and I are older than our friend Claire here. Claire's probably pushed through some of those early career experiences, but if you're a brand new baby lawyer, some of those performance conversations are probably giving you pieces that you do need to think about, attempt to work on, and become self-aware of at least how you're perceived along those dimensions so you can manage the perceptions of them, even if you can't get much better.

Jennifer Delgado:

I think that's really good advice. I think there's something similar that I experienced that's—it's not quite an area for improvement that would end up in a review, but it was something that was holding me back from becoming the senior lawyer on the team. And that was, I would take home the stress of my litigation work. And it was very difficult for me to go to sleep at night and not run through the entire day's worth of events. And my job is to sometimes fight. I have to. And I do it all the time and sometimes it's about things that really matter. And other times it's about discovery or things that just don't really need a fight, but sometimes you deal with an adversary that wants to fight about everything. And it was really hard for me to overcome it. And I have to say, if I didn't push through that moment in my career, I would not be here today.

I would have done something else because I would have said to myself, "This isn't for me. It's just not me. I'm not a person that likes fighting for no reason. It's just not part of my personality." But as it turns out, what I'm very good at actually is compartmentalizing and I've done that very well and, over time, I have gotten very good at simply just ignoring it. I am on for that moment and then I forget about it when I go to sleep. And I think what you just said, Stephanie, is very important. I think over time you learn to shed the things that you've spent maybe 20 years trying to hone and you've found some way to overcome it by hiring it out

essentially For instance, I'm not the best person in terms of doing laundry. I might decide to hire someone to do that, and that's sort of like a housekeeping version of what we're talking about, but I think that's very important advice and a way to differentiate between advice to some of our younger audience?

Stephanie Argentine: I think the other piece that you tripped in there, Jennifer, is I imagine that most of this audience is high achieving, veering into perfectionist female, and that has a certain flavor and commonality of experience that I think most of us probably perseverate on things and play and replay. And so, you heard me talking about continuous evolution. That's a strength. The continuous feedback loop of, "How might I, what if I," all of that. It burns energy and it probably isn't super helpful. And so, for those of us that on this podcast that are in that realm of female or not, it's gender neutral, but that perfectionist, high performing, high achieving, it's important for us to get clearer on what we actually want to work on and what we need to let go of.

Claire Dronzek: Yes, that is a great point, especially for junior women attorneys who are on that perfectionist grind, for lack of a better word, that they've been on for years through all of their schooling. And I'm wondering specifically for junior women attorneys who may be sitting at a desk at a small law firm, a big law firm, a government agency, or maybe even an in house role early in their career, what should they do to keep their options open if they aren't sold on the path that's right in front of them? Besides these networking opportunities you're talking about, is there anything beyond that, such as building relationships with clients, building relationships internally, or anything else you would recommend?

Stephanie Argentine: The building relationships, absolutely. There were times during my career where the roles that I was doing were not hitting on all cylinders at that point. And for me, I did an exercise around what would fill my tank. And I realized that for me, networking and talking to people that filled my tank is something that's important to do. And so for each of us, how do you fill that tank back up? And clients or CLE or conferences, volunteering, all of those types of things are ways that we can potentially refill the tank that also help with that evolution and reinvention of ourselves as well.

Jennifer Delgado: Stephanie, we've been talking a while and I want to pivot back to AI for our last question because I think even in the last couple of weeks, I've heard just endless, endless discussion about what all sorts of people believe will happen as AI becomes more and more prevalent and replaces more and more jobs. I have a nine-year-old and a six-year-old, so they're far away from the job market, but I often find myself thinking about what is it that they're going to be doing with their life and what

sorts of skills should they be building at this stage of their life? What is your advice to women in both senior and in junior roles in terms of how to ensure that they're not replaced by AI?

Stephanie Argentine: Oh, that's a tough question. I think those of us already in senior roles, we need to learn it and use it effectively. And I think that if we're applying our wisdom and judgment over time, I think that that's probably enough to get us through to the end of our career if we're taking a learning mentality to it. I think those of us that are younger and earlier in our career, the how to leverage it as an amplification of the work that we're doing. So, what are the things that you are doing that are rote and repeatable that don't add a lot of value that would allow you to leverage your time with more deep thinking?

So as a stupid example, one year I hosted Thanksgiving, first year I was asked to do it for a big family. The next year I realized I should have written that down. They asked me to do it again. I should have written it down because it's the same thing every year. It doesn't change. So, I wrote it down so I didn't have to recreate the process and the SOP and the methodology and the cooking plan for Thanksgiving. We probably each have things in our career as early attorneys that there's high leverage opportunities to build skills that do that work for us. And then we get more time to do synthesis and pattern recognition and apply wisdom and judgment. So maybe we get to senior level skills faster because all we're doing is the cool stuff.

For kids, I don't know, Jennifer, for six and nine-year-olds, I'd be looking for schools and programs and pedagogy that weave the both and in. What are the things that we need to be practicing, puzzles, games, those kinds of things that we need to do with our brain because I think it's going to change how we learn and how we teach, I think, as well.

Jennifer Delgado: Claire, do you have any closing questions for Stephanie before we let her go?

Claire Dronzek: Nope. Just to say that your input has been so valuable for attorneys and professionals at all levels, and we really enjoyed having you here.

Jennifer Delgado: Stephanie, thank you for spending time with us and contributing to *Real Talk*.

Stephanie Argentine: It's been my pleasure. Thank you.

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