

MONDAY, MARCH 6, 2023

PERSPECTIVE

# Five tips for reinventing yourself professionally

By Joan B. Kessler

The theme of Women's History Month this year is "Celebrating Women Who Tell Our Stories." Pondering this theme, I wanted to tell my story. Inspired by the panel I spoke on last year at the Los Angeles Business Journal Women's Leadership Symposium, I want to share five tips for rebranding yourself and how I reinvented myself as a lawyer and then as a neutral. Sharing your story is a great way to inspire women in the legal profession and to open doors for those looking to start a new career. In my case, change occurred about 20 years ago, when I began a new career in alternative dispute resolution (ADR).

I always wanted to be a lawyer but took a different path initially. I earned a Ph.D. and became a college professor, teaching conflict resolution and communications, and was a jury researcher/consultant. I created my own barriers regarding pursuing a career in law, and I embraced those barriers for years. I decided that law school would be too difficult. At the time, I was happily married with two small children and had a tenured position. After 13 years, however, I overcame my fears and apprehension and decided to enroll in law school. I completed law school, successfully practiced law for many years and transitioned my legal practice to ADR. This led to my joining JAMS. My experience shows that you can reinvent yourself and explore a new profession.



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Here are five tips that I believe allowed me to rebrand myself as an ADR professional.

1. Do not create barriers for yourself, and do not embrace those barriers.
  - Be realistic.
  - Be aggressive and move forward.
  - Be confident in your abilities.
2. Maintain a work-life balance.
  - You do not have to be perfect.
  - You can be a professional and have a personal life too.
  - Take time for yourself.
  - Work hard and play hard.

3. Use the tools you have honed along the way.

- I learned to be a good litigator, which helps me in my mediations and arbitrations.
- I became an expert on jury behavior, which helps me explain to parties the downsides and risks of going before a jury, judge or arbitrator.
- I did research on intercultural communication as a college professor, which helps me work effectively with people of all backgrounds.

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- I have studied and taught conflict resolution and interpersonal communication, and I have developed skills that are invaluable in my ADR practice.
4. Persevere. Don't ever give up.
- Most obstacles that we face in life are not insurmountable.
  - Pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start anew.
  - Fresh starts and new beginnings are refreshing.
5. Pay it forward. Mentor others. Develop your professional network.
- I have mentored young people for many years.
  - Helping others find their paths is very rewarding.
  - Forming a network of resources is extremely important.

#### **High Points of My ADR Practice**

My key areas of practice are real estate (landlord/tenant, purchase and sale, borrower/lender

disputes and partnership); employment (wage and hour, wrongful termination, harassment); business; entertainment; and health care.

One of my key skills is working with challenging people, developing their trust to help reduce hostility.

I speak Spanish and understand many cultures (Korean, Japanese, Persian, etc.), which I have found very helpful as a neutral.

I never give up when trying to resolve a case. For instance, I will use a mediator's proposal when necessary, and I always follow up with

parties until they reach resolution.

I have learned to pay it forward and reinvent myself, and I help others do the same. I mentor many law students each year, and I particularly enjoy watching them succeed. Most of these mentees are women. This is one way that I have built my network, as my prior mentees assist newer mentees in their job searches. I believe that when you leverage the right tools, you can adjust and revise your direction in a new career or profession.