



# BREAKING GROUND

How Successful Women Lawyers  
Build Thriving Practices

*Deborah B. Farone*



## **The Power of Purposeful Connection**

**Author:** Bridget Mary McCormack

This material is a Think Piece from *Breaking Ground: How Successful Women Lawyers Build Thriving Practices*, reprinted with permission for Bridget Mary McCormack.

No part of this may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher (except in the case of brief quotations). No part of this may be shared with or used by any third party, including any generative AI system such as ChatGPT, or any person who is not an Authorized User. Questions can be directed to [plipress@pli.edu](mailto:plipress@pli.edu).

**Purchase the book with a 20% discount here:**

[www.pli.edu/breakinggroundbook](http://www.pli.edu/breakinggroundbook)

## Think Piece

---

### The Power of Purposeful Connection

By Bridget Mary McCormack\*

If you had told me ten years ago that I would one day lead the American Arbitration Association–International Centre for Dispute Resolution (AAA–ICDR), I might have paused—not because the idea seemed implausible, but because the path wasn’t typical. At the time, I served as an Associate Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court, collaborating across government branches, the legal profession, and the people of our state to enhance the Michigan courts’ service and access to justice. Even in public service, my network was expansive and diverse. Courts serve everyone, and my professional relationships ranged broadly—from legal aid attorneys and solo practitioners to global law firm leaders and business executives. Building and nurturing this diverse stakeholder network was fundamental to understanding what justice required and was critical to ensuring I could smoothly navigate new roles, such as when I became the court’s Chief Justice in 2019. These relationships became the bridges connecting my public service experience directly to my new responsibilities at the AAA–ICDR.

Many of us learn early that “networking” is transactional, or worse, performative. I used to bristle at the term. But real networks aren’t shallow ladders. They’re ecosystems. And the richest ecosystems are biodiverse. Throughout my career, building a diverse, mission-aligned network has proven the most powerful way to

---

\* Bridget Mary McCormack is President and CEO of the American Arbitration Association–International Centre for Dispute Resolution. She is also a Strategic Advisor to the Future of the Profession Initiative at the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School. Until the end of 2022, McCormack was Chief Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court, where she championed innovation and the use of technology to improve access to justice.

progress toward varied goals: justice reform, technological innovation, or impactful business development. My network's organizing principle is "who shares this vision, and how can we support one another?"

Some of my most impactful professional relationships began without a specific goal. A casual conversation at a legal innovation summit about AI's potential eventually grew into strategic initiatives that now shape the AAA-ICDR's direction. These informal yet purposeful connections often crystallize into transformative collaborations. They might not appear neatly in CRM systems, but their impact is undeniable.

When I transitioned from the judiciary to lead the AAA-ICDR, I entered a new organizational structure and marketplace but never felt disconnected. The relationships I cultivated over the years spent listening to and collaborating with people dedicated to improving legal systems buoyed me. Connections with legal tech innovators, academics, bar leaders, and businesspeople weren't simply preparatory; they actively energized my transition.

Building such values-driven networks is essential for women lawyers, especially. Too often, women are signaled to think small regarding business development: Build one client at a time, one collaboration at a time. Yet our networks can—and should—be expansive, strategic, and informed by our whole selves. Some of my strongest connections emerged unexpectedly from conversations about everything from access to justice to parenting. More than once, these conversations evolved into speaking opportunities, board invitations, and fruitful collaborations, significantly boosting visibility and impact.

Here's what I've learned—and what I offer women at all stages of their legal careers:

Lead with curiosity. People remember thoughtful questions and notice when you genuinely listen. Authentic curiosity forms the foundation of meaningful connections.

Invest in people before you need them. The ideal moment to build your network isn't during a big transition. It's now. Show up consistently, offer help generously, and share ideas openly. These investments return in ways you can't predict.

Cross boundaries intentionally. Build connections beyond your immediate practice area or firm. Engage in nonprofit boards, policy initiatives, or academic environments. Innovation and opportunity flourish at these intersections.

Practice proactive generosity. Refer others, especially women. Celebrate their achievements publicly. Introduce them to your contacts. Generosity builds deep trust and strengthens your credibility.

Anchor yourself in purpose. Enduring, robust networks grow up from shared values. Whether building a client base or launching a new initiative, clearly articulate and lead with your "why."

Today, as our organization thoughtfully integrates AI into alternative dispute resolution, my network remains integral. I host a podcast convening diverse voices at the intersection of AI and law. I facilitate workshops with arbitrators, in-house counsel, and academics to envision the future. None of this happens in isolation. It occurs because I've invested profoundly in a network that continually inspires bolder thinking and courageous action.

When women build purposeful connections, we transform the profession. Our collective networks are engines of meaningful, lasting progress.