

DARE Q & A with: Molly B. Burke



From 1999 to 2012, Molly B. Burke was General Counsel for GE Energy Services, a \$17 billion business providing energy solutions in more than a hundred countries. During her tenure, she built a global legal team of more than a hundred lawyers and participated in assessing, acquiring, and integrating more than sixty acquisitions.

Burke joined GE in July 1995 as a litigator at Corporate Headquarters, managing significant litigation across GE's businesses. Before joining the company, she was a litigation partner in the Seattle office of Heller, Ehrman, White & McAuliffe, where she specialized in large commercial litigation.

Molly B. Burke is a member of the Board of Directors of the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta, for which she has chaired the Strategic Planning and Community Engagement committees. She has also served on the Board of Directors, Executive Committee, and Board of Advisors of the Hands On Atlanta charity.

Burke received her B.A. from Smith College, magna cum laude, and her J.D., cum laude, from Harvard Law School. She was awarded a Fulbright-Hayes Scholarship and studied at St. Anne's College, Oxford.

Q: What is the most challenging thing you have ever had to do?

A: Among the most challenging things I ever did was to leave my law firm partnership and move my two children, ages six and seven, from Seattle to Connecticut to take a job at GE.

Q: Where did you get the courage and confidence to do it?

A: When I graduated from Law School in the early 1980s, the conventional wisdom was that the best career a lawyer could have was as a partner in a leading national law firm working on "the most important" matters. I chose this course and was successful at it. After clerking for a federal judge, I joined a law firm and made partner as a litigator in five years, despite two maternity leaves. I had a challenging national practice, which culminated in taking the depositions of "the Keating Five," including Senators John McCain and John Glenn as well as Don Riegle.

In 1994, I got a call from a headhunter about an in-house litigation position at GE corporate headquarters. I explained that she had the wrong number, as I was a partner in a prestigious law firm, a litigator who tried cases, and a person who lived in Seattle. In addition, I told her, I had observed the roles of my in-house clients, and I knew I had more interesting work than they did! She persisted, however, and I ultimately agreed to go to an interview at GE. At this time, the General Counsel of GE was transforming (*cont.*)

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A: (cont.) the legal function by bringing in young partners from great law firms who were viewed as stars. During my interviews, everyone spoke about the range of opportunities for a lawyer inside GE as well as the fact that a lawyer could more effectively counsel the business from inside.

I spent the long flight home and the weeks following it thinking about my current career, and I decided that, while I loved it, there was little potential for significant growth beyond what I had already achieved. I could try more cases, certainly, but in five years, I concluded, I would not be learning much that was new. I also thought about the changes in the legal profession. As clients' bills went up, they were turning less and less to outside counsel, which meant that the role was becoming much more task oriented and less that of a genuine counselor.

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Finally, I thought about myself and the kind of person I am. I realized that challenge energizes me and that, when it is absent, I don't do my best work. I also thought about what I wanted for my children. It had always been my goal to expose them to the world. I grew up in Rochester, New York, and had never been out of the country (except to Canada) until I went to college. Living in England for three years after college convinced me there was much to learn from international experience. GE offered the opportunity to expose my children to the world at a much earlier age.

Ultimately, I decided that to pass up this opportunity would be to lose a chance for professional and personal growth. Although it meant leaving a position that few in the legal profession achieve, I knew I could do even more and that I would not be happy if I didn't take the risk of doing something different.

Q: What is the biggest mistake you have ever made? What did you learn and how did you recover?

A: The biggest mistake I ever made was failing to appreciate the importance of relationships in corporate culture. I believed that by just doing the best work, I would advance. Thus, early in my career, I did not spend enough time building relationships and cultivating supporters, whether for my own advancement or to achieve changes I believed were important for the business. After running into a few roadblocks, however, I began to observe how my colleagues succeeded where I had not. I started talking to peers and superiors about my thoughts and aspirations, gauging the level of support they might provide. I listened carefully to their comments, eager now to understand how their perspective on an issue might differ from mine, so that I could more effectively address their concerns or rally their support. I observed the relationships (cont.)

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A: (cont.) they had with each other, and I figured out who were the leaders whose views were followed. I made it a point to ensure these leaders were on board before I presented a new initiative. Using this approach, I found it was much easier to initiate changes where I believed they were necessary or desirable.

Q: If you had a young woman you cared deeply about entering the workforce today, what single piece of advice would you have for her?

A: I would advise anyone entering the workforce, but particularly young women, to understand the importance of relationships. We often think that if we work hard and do good work we will succeed. To some extent, this is true, but if you have few supporters or any enemies, you can be prevented from achieving what your abilities would otherwise enable you to achieve. Developing the necessary relationships can be a challenge, particularly if you are juggling work, family, and taking care of yourself. It is easy to see why there is so little time for a lunch or a drink after work, much less attending a business-sponsored event such as an exhibit opening. In fact, you do not have to lunch every day or attend every event, but you do need to choose the occasions that work best for you and then be sure to use them wisely. Don't stand in the corner. Talk to people!

While it is true that you may not be missed at outside events, it is even more true that, by missing them, you don't get to know your colleagues inside and outside your business in a way that will make them think of you when an opportunity arises.

Developing relationships is a practice you should start on day one of your career and with a 360-degree approach. It is as important to cultivate relationships with your peers and subordinates as with your bosses. You don't know who is going to be present when someone asks for thoughts on candidates for a new role or asks specifically whether you would be a good potential candidate.

Q: What advice do you have for building self-confidence?

A: Self-confidence is built from success. Success stems from hard work and knowledge. Fully engage in and master whatever you are working on, so that you do it well. If you make yourself an expert in the task before you, even if it seems a minor role to you, you will soon feel confident talking about it and demonstrating your knowledge. The more often you do this, the more confident you will become. (cont.)

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A: (*cont.*) The act of taking on and mastering new things will teach you that you can master new things, and it will give you the confidence to try even more.

Q: How did you make the leap from middle to senior management?

A: The gap between middle management and senior executive management can only be bridged by leadership. Middle managers are characterized by execution and delivery of an objective. Middle managers formulate tactical plans to achieve a strategy promulgated by someone else. Senior executives formulate the strategy and then must mobilize and inspire others to execute it. In assessing candidates for senior executive roles, business organizations look to the ranks of middle managers for evidence of the leadership skills capable of mobilizing and inspiring. Middle managers are functional leaders, who often have a difficult time demonstrating these skills because their role is often perceived to be to support the organization's objectives from a functional point of view rather than to formulate strategy and lead the execution. In my case, I was able to demonstrate senior executive skills by agreeing to launch a hub of GE's Women's Network in Atlanta.

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At the time, Atlanta's network had died in the face of the challenge of mobilizing a thousand or so women across more than thirty business locations throughout the metropolitan area. My approach was to recruit a team of strong women leaders from across the business and to formulate a launch plan that involved a series of programs with great speakers. I set out to convince our business leaders, both men and women, that their physical presence was an important part of motivating women to attend the events. By the end of the first year, we had a robust hub, which had centrally planned events as well as smaller gatherings at the individual business sites. Our hub was soon recognized as a leader and was chosen to host the GE-wide invitation-only women's conference in Atlanta the following year. This conference would be attended by our chairman as well as all the senior business leaders in the company. As hub leader, I identified a team of women from across GE to plan, organize, and present the conference. While I could have said that I had more than enough to do with my job and my kids, this experience enabled me to demonstrate my leadership to a wider audience and secured my promotion.

Q: What is your greatest fear today?

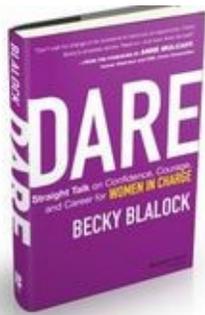
A: My biggest fear for women in the workplace is that we will give up seeking to ensure that all (*cont.*)

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A: (cont.) persons, regardless of gender, race, ethnic origin, or any other factor, have a fair chance to realize their full potential. Increasingly, I hear contradictory claims that the problem has been solved or that it can never be solved, at least not for women, because it is just too hard to juggle all the competing demands.

The fact is that both of these contradictions contain an element of truth. In the last twenty years, women and members of other minorities have made inroads in business, government, academia, and so on. Nevertheless, these groups remain underrepresented in leadership in proportion to their numbers in the workforce. Moreover, all the data show that women still carry a disproportionate share of the burden of family, whether “family” means caring for children or for parents.

The danger is that women forget that both of these assertions—that there is “no problem” anymore or that you cannot ever have it all—have been made throughout decades in which women have actually been succeeding in the workplace. Each individual will confront challenges both unique to herself and common to all. None are insurmountable, but each must be addressed thoughtfully, drawing on what is by now a very substantial body of experience.



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