ROUNDTABLE

HER HOUSE HER LAWS

The legal industry has often been described as a "boy's club," marked by a notable gender disparity, a hierarchical structure, and an exclusive atmosphere. However, a few female practitioners in Singapore have chosen to make their own rules by launching their own law firms. In this roundtable, three female law firm founders share their challenges, vision, and how they plan to capitalise on new opportunities.

BY SARAH WONG

ALB: What are the most important lessons you've learned in establishing and running your law firm successfully?

Lisa Sam, managing partner, Lisa Sam & Company: Establishing and running my law firm taught me that success lies in striking a balance between empathy and sustainability. A law firm owner must manage both the business and the practice of law simultaneously. Both roles are equally important but can pull you in different directions. While legal expertise is imperative, running a firm also requires the lawyer to ensure the sustainability of operations. Running a law firm is not solely about work but also about being responsible to one's employees and clients, and upholding the ethical values of the legal profession, which involves discharging your duties as an officer of the Court.

The firm's vision and mission are important and form the foundation upon which the practice, as well as its employees' livelihoods, are built. Any-

Image: Gorodenkoff/Shutterstock.com

one wanting to run their law firm must be committed to maintaining a balance between empathy and sustainability.

Shobna Chandran, director, Shobna Chandran LLC: Gratitude, Trust, and vision/values. There is a saying, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." I would not have been able to set up this law firm and keep it going without the support and love of my family, friends and team at Shobna Chandran LLC.

Secondly, I am a perfectionist and a type A individual who seeks to do my best in every endeavour I set my mind to. But I have found that the best way to grow as a leader is to plan, take steps and trust that everything will fall into place (in other words, pursue progress over perfection).

Thirdly, my law firm embodies the values that we live and breathe every day (fearless advocacy, excellence and commitment to the pursuit of justice for our clients). I have learnt that being guided by a vision and values allows us to stand steadfast (no matter the circumstances) in what we believe and be the voice that our clients richly deserve.

Ling Ling Luo, managing director, Luo Ling Ling LLC: Upholding high ethical standards is important to our firm. On the rare occasion when a mistake was made, we would inform the client immediately, and if there were that costs consequences, the firm would pay for the costs. A leader needs to set the right tone for younger lawyers and teach them the suitable methods.

Lisa Sam

It is also important to follow the rules and reject clients who request waiver of Anti-Money Laundering and Know-Your-Client checks. Most of these clients have an expectation that smaller firms may be willing to bend the rules. Even if the payment offered by the client may be very large, it is just not worth it.

Shobna Chandran

Financial management is essential for the viability of the firm. As a virtual law firm, our expenses are kept to a minimum. Instead of allocating resources to maintaining a physical office that no one will use anyway, we prefer to divert these resources to bonuses for lawyers and staff.

Ling Ling Luo

In addition, effective team management in a fully remote environment is challenging and unavoidable. If disputes amongst colleagues are not quickly mediated or addressed, the work environment will quickly turn toxic.

ALB: What do you think can be done to make the legal industry more conducive to female participation and ownership?

Sam: To enhance female participation and ownership in the legal industry, a deliberate effort should be made to delegate tasks and provide more opportunities for women lawyers to assume leadership roles and build their confidence. Constant encouragement, the cultivation of a culture of support, and the open acknowledgement and commendation of successful milestones--by both male and female lawyers in the industry--will boost women's confidence levels. In Singapore, there is no lack of examples of successful women lawyer leaders. Women, however, should be given autonomy to approach tasks differently. This will encourage novel and innovative solutions, which is the beauty of embracing a diversity of views and representation.

Chandran: First, the belief that female participation (which brings in "softer skills" like empathy and connection) is crucial in the legal industry.

Second, as leaders of the legal profession, we need to recognise young female talent and encourage them to pursue "stretch opportunities".

Finally, as female leaders, we have an obligation to send the elevator down and ensure that the profession continues to see strong and talented female advocates in the years to come. To this end, I head a mentorship programme with the Law Society to ensure that more female lawyers have guidance and support to stay in practice.

Luo: Individual female professionals need to take the first step to make their practice more conducive for themselves instead of waiting for others to do it for them. If your law firm is unwilling to change for you, set up your own practice.

But before female lawyers leave their firms in large droves, law firm leaders could implement more family-friendly practices such as remote working, and flexible working arrangements.

Leaders need to stop compassionate bias: give that opportunity to a lady lawyer

who just returned to work from maternity leave. Before you assume that she may rather work less hours in the office and stay home with the baby, ask her first.

Give the same networking and leadership opportunities to female lawyers. With more female leaders, you would inspire other younger women to aspire to the same leadership positions.

ALB: What qualities are essential for a law firm leader to evolve with time and survive the next wave of technological disruptions?

Sam: Law firm leaders must keep an open mind, read widely, know the benefits and risks of using AI, and harness technological disruptions. We need to keep honing these skills to focus on value-based work and explore how AI and technological disruptions can be incorporated into legal practice. The buzz surrounding technology disruption — the current iteration of GPT — is still in its infancy. If the delivery of legal services proves to be an effective and value-added service using "natural language processing", clients may increasingly expect lawyers to utilise AI or similar technological innovations to automate legal research and the drafting of documents, such as briefs and memos. However, there is also a need to bridge the gap for individuals who may be less tech-savvy to ensure that they are not left behind in this evolving landscape.

"As female leaders, we have an obligation to send the elevator down and ensure that the profession continues to see strong and talented female advocates in the years to come. To this end, I head a mentorship programme with the Law Society to ensure that more female lawyers have guidance and support to stay in practice."

— Shobna Chandran, Shobna Chandran LLC

Chandran: First is technology. To that end, a nimble firm like ours uses technology (and resourcefulness) to punch above our weight in disputes where we face opponents with larger teams.

Second, I would say prioritising disputes in certain high-growth areas. For example, as a firm, we specialise in technology disputes (all the way from IP cases to cases involving cryptocurrency); as part of our banking disputes practice, we also work on cases in the private wealth/trust and family office space. Our Appellate Practice, which focuses on novel and complex areas of law, spans aviation, equity and trust, professional and medical negligence, partnership disputes and fraud/misrepresentation claims.

Then, it's critical to have humility and a growth mindset. By staying open and humble, and constantly learning and growing, I strive to make our firm a platform for lawyers who are similarly looking to grow and develop their professional skills while serving clients and doing good work. It is truly a privilege to be able to use one's skills and talents in pursuit of a worthy cause, and I am so grateful and blessed that I have the opportunity to do what I love every day (advocacy) and humbly serve and honour my clients' trust and faith in us, sur-

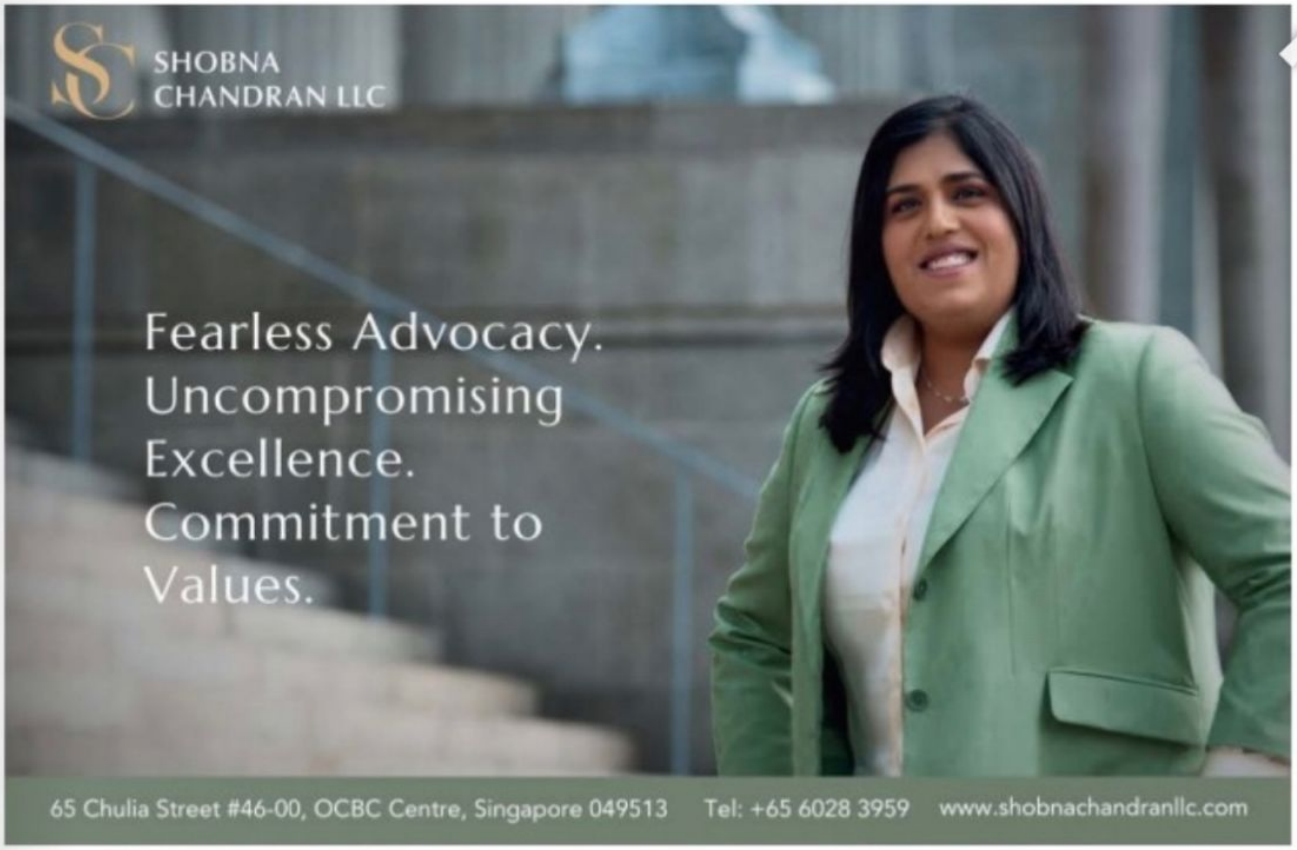
Image: Gorodenkoff/Shutterstock.com

rounded by amazing and like-minded colleagues.

Finally, leveraging relationships and collaboration. I truly believe in the power of collaboration, and my law firm is designed around collaboration with other law firms who instruct and/or work alongside us. I know and recognise my strengths in courtroom advocacy and trust and value my instructing counsel and partners in other firms who work alongside me for their wide array of talents, including subject-matter expertise in certain technical areas of law, foreign law counsel who work with me on arbitration matters and some of my instructing counsel who have forged deep relationships with their clients and who want to work together to achieve the best possible result for their clients. The power of collaboration also allows us to structure our team leanly and therefore afford high quality, conflict-free representation at reasonable prices and accessible to a broader group of clients.

Luo: A law firm leader needs to learn new technology as early as possible, so that you could decide if it is useful for your practice. Even if you do not intend to use a new technology or software, you need to know the impact of this technology on your practice.

Adaptability is essential, considering that technological disruptions will change the way we practice. Younger lawyers prefer remote working arrangements, and with more video court hearings, law firm leaders will need to move away from the traditional in-person office culture. Some senior lawyers prefer that their associates work in office so that they could monitor them more effectively. It may be true that you would be able to monitor someone more easily if he or she were right in front of you. But, if you could change the way you supervise a junior lawyer, it could be more effective. In an office setting, you would have walked over to ask how the draft is and look at the state of the draft on the Associate's screen. You could do the same in the virtual office, but in a different way. You could easily ask, how is the draft? Send me the live link to the document on the shared drive. In this document, you can assess the progress of a draft as well.

A consultative leadership style is more effective and suitable for the new generation of lawyers. The old school training approach that we call "tough love" is bullying. Younger lawyers are not concerned if their CVs show short stints and will not hesitate to quit without having a new job. Effective communication with your team is essential before you buy the next technology. If your team members are not on board and are not keen to use the new technology, buying something that would not be used would be pointless.

Finally, a positive attitude to embrace changes will help you lead your team.