

# NEW YORK BUSINESS JOURNAL

# WOMEN *of* INFLUENCE

## Meet Michele Penzer, a partner at Latham & Watkins and a Woman of Influence



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### New York Business Journal Staff

The New York Business Journal named 79 honorees for its 2016 class of Women of Influence honorees. The program recognizes women business leaders in the New York City area who innovate, succeed and “pay it forward.” In the days ahead, we’ll be giving readers a chance to hear directly from these women.

**Michèle Penzer, partner, Latham & Watkins LLP**

**Tell us about your family:** My husband (and high school sweetheart) Jason and I have two kids – a son who is 16 and a daughter who is 13.

**Where were you born?** New

York City

The one word that describes you: Determined

**What was your first job and what did you learn from it?** I started at Latham & Watkins as a summer associate in 1992 and have been fortunate to remain at the firm my entire career. Right away I learned the value of working with colleagues who support and inspire each other to do our best.

I also learned that keeping an open mind and taking time to explore options is the best way to find the right path. When I first joined the firm, I took full advantage of Latham’s Unassigned Associate Program, which allowed me to explore a number of practices during my first cou-

ple of years at the firm, rather than choosing a single practice right out of law school. The exposure to a variety of practices helped me to learn the importance of being nimble and gave me the chance to see business needs from many legal perspectives. Ultimately, after sampling a number of practices, I chose to become a finance lawyer, which has proven to be a great fit for me – and a very fulfilling career.

**What is your proudest career accomplishment?** To have developed great relationships with clients over the years, and to have had the opportunity to assume several leadership positions in the firm. In 2009, I was elected to the firm’s Executive Committee, and was the first

woman (and youngest member ever) to serve in that role. In 2015, when I became the managing partner of our firm's New York office, I was also the first woman to serve in that role. I'm proud of each of these accomplishments and am honored to be chosen as a counselor, advisor and leader by so many people that I respect.

**Who has been the biggest influence on your career, and why?** At Latham, Dave Gordon and Bill Voge, both of whom I had the pleasure of working with when I was a very young associate, each had a tremendous impact on my career. Dave and Bill, together with several other amazing supervisors, taught me everything I needed to know about being a lawyer and went out of their way to include me and encourage me. Watching them in action was a terrific experience. I learned so many of my legal and client relationship skills just by tagging along for the ride. Dave currently serves as vice chair of the firm and Bill is the global chair and managing partner, and I continue to learn from them both.

**What is your philosophy as a mentor?** Some of the most valuable mentor/mentee relationships develop naturally and are not necessarily assigned. These types of relationships are crucial to achieving success and happiness in one's career, and I encourage everyone to spend time developing them. I also believe that there is no one path to success, because there is no one definition of success. I try to impart that philosophy as a mentor. What you define as a successful career and the way you define happiness may in fact be very different from the way your

colleague down the hall defines those things. Don't measure yourself against someone else's definition of success or happiness. Think about what is important to you and then figure out how to achieve it.

**What advice would you give to your younger self?** Enjoy downtime. It is easy to worry in this business. When we are too busy at work, we worry about not having enough time for our families; when we are not busy enough at work, we worry about where the next deal will come from. We should all remember that it is OK to go home early on the off chance we are having a slow day (or week), and to ENJOY that time away from the office. Things will be busy again soon enough (and we will be wondering why we didn't take advantage of the downtime). If my younger self had worried a little less, she would have worked just as hard and achieved just as much, but would have been a little happier while doing it.

**What is the biggest challenge or opportunity facing your company in 2016?** One of the things that makes my job so interesting is that I am not only a legal advisor, but a business partner with my clients. So both the challenge and opportunity for my firm is to stay ahead of what's happening in the industry and anticipate what our clients' needs will be: What are their market opportunities? What are the threats to their businesses? And what more can we do to deliver to them creative and innovative solutions that meet those needs?

**Guilty pleasure:** "I hate to admit this, but I really like ... " Watching "Say Yes to the Dress"

**What needs to happen for more women to succeed in business in the United States?**

There are fabulous women succeeding in business every day in the United States, but, of course, we would all love to see even more women achieve their goals. To do so, we all need to recognize that success comes in many shapes and sizes and that career paths may or may not be linear. How one woman defines a successful career may be very different from the way her colleague does and each may ultimately achieve her goals in very different ways. It is also critically important for all of us – men and women alike – to try to eradicate the unconscious biases that may prove to be obstacles to success. Although it may be easiest or most comfortable to surround ourselves with people most like us, and to always choose to work with that group, providing opportunities that will take all of us – supervisors and supervisees, men and women, alike – out of our comfort zones is important to helping women succeed.

**Charities or other causes that are most important to you:** I am a member of the board of directors of the New York Women's Foundation, an amazing charitable organization focused on improving the lives of low-income women and girls in New York City. I also lead Latham's global Women Lawyers Group, which addresses the business challenges and opportunities unique to women lawyers.

**Words to live by:** Keep an open mind and embrace what life has to offer.

Connect with Michèle Penzer on [LinkedIn](#) and on Twitter @ [lathamwatkins](#).