



Christine Lagarde

[Jesse Londin]

As head of one of the world's biggest law firms, Christine Lagarde has certainly earned her Law Star. Join the global chairman of Baker & McKenzie as she chats with LawCrossing about her adventures in world domination.

Go global, young Law Star. And this week's winner sure has. In our age of globalization, a successful 21st century lawyer may never become chairman of one of the world's largest international firms boasting 2003 revenue topping \$1.134 billion and a stable of about 3,200 lawyers, including 620 partners, practicing out of 66 offices in 36 countries. But Christine Lagarde is not just any successful lawyer.

The world of law firm practice has changed since Russell Baker and John McKenzie founded their shop in 1949. And at the age of 47, the first female chairman of Baker & McKenzie, a French national and mother of two teenage sons, is a gilded symbol of that change.

Chairman Christine Lagarde - and yes, do call her chairman, not chairwoman, chairperson or chair - began her rise to the dizzying heights of super Law Stardom at Baker & McKenzie's Paris office in 1981, when she handled labor, employment and antitrust matters, making partner in 1987.

Her first big leadership role came in 1991, when she became managing partner of the Paris office. Voila. For her next step on the ladder to global domination, Ms. Lagarde was elected to Baker & McKenzie's executive committee in 1995.

In October, 1999, the partners took the bold step of electing Ms. Lagarde Chairman of the Global Executive Committee of Baker & McKenzie.

And how pleased are the gents with the performance of our Law Star? Clearly delighted, thank you. The firm reports that during Ms. Lagarde's tenure, Baker & McKenzie's global revenues increased an aggregate of 30 percent. They re-elected her in the summer of 2003.

And presumably because running a mega law firm is indeed a business, in 2002, The Wall Street Journal Europe clocked her in as "the 5th most successful businesswoman in Europe."

In her life-before-Baker era, Ms. Lagarde studied at the University of Aix-en-Provence and the Political Science Institute as well as the Paris Law School. She graduated from and did post-graduate work in labor law and business at Paris University.

From her perch at the top of the world, Chairman Lagarde graciously took the time to receive her Law Star and answer questions.

Q: Madame Chairman, it is a great thrill to name you a Law Star. As Chairman of Baker & McKenzie, yours is one of the most demanding, coveted and high-profile positions a law firm partner can fill, certainly in the U.S. and perhaps the world. How have you been enjoying the experience?

A: Yes, I am privileged to have enjoyed professionally every minute of the last four years. I have learned a lot about our organization, about myself, as well as about ways to improve both, which I hope we have.

Q: The logistics of heading up such a far-flung enterprise as Baker & McKenzie obviously presents unique challenges. In fact, you have jokingly referred to the job as "impossible." How familiar are you generally with the different business cultures and legal practices of the areas in which the firm operates? As Chairman, have you actually traveled to all of the firm's 66 offices in 36 countries, or do you do a lot of teleconferencing?

A: I was reasonably familiar with some of the Continental and American business cultures and practices for having lived in both France and the United States. I have also been lucky, over the last twenty years of my professional life with Baker & McKenzie, to be exposed to the characteristics of the nationalities represented in our firm (over 50 of them) because of the team-oriented way in which we operate and serve our clients.

As far back as I can recall, there has been no significant work assignment where I was not teaming up with at least two or three other lawyers from different nationalities and background. As Chairman, when I visit an office in a country where I have never been before, I try to learn from my colleagues and partners. I listen a lot; I observe the way they conduct business and I talk to our clients as well. I have not visited our offices in Riyadh, Bogota, Brasilia and Rio, Guadalajara, Almaty and Kyiv. I have visited all other offices at least once, some of them, the largest, several times a year.



Q: Many law students and new graduates dream of making partner at a top law firm. Only a fraction, of course, succeed. Some associates believe making it is a matter of luck and office politics. Others feel the rules may still be different for the boys versus the girls. Can you offer any advice that might clear up some of the mystery and help young lawyers figure out if they have what it takes?

A: I like analogies and I like animals. For me, in our firm, swans can certainly reach to the top. Swans stand for “smart”, “working hard”, “ambitious”, “nice” and “savvy”. Any lawyer who can display all these qualities and operate as a team player can reach to the top and achieve his or her ambition within our firm.

Q: Great advice. We’ll have to remember that!

The world is home to approximately 190 countries (a number that varies depending on who is counting), which suggests there are still some locations on the planet where Baker & McKenzie does not have an office! Despite that shortcoming, the firm’s annual revenue easily clears the one billion dollar mark. What is your vision for the future of the firm? And what about the size question, which you probably hear a lot: Does bigger necessarily mean better?

A: My vision for our firm is for it to be a global law firm built on a culture of friendship, innovation and trust, dedicated to delivering practical value-added solutions, to which we bring to bear a unique blend of local excellence and global reach in a working environment which is both challenging and inspiring to our people.

Bigger to me means more energy, better coverage where it matters to our clients. The debate of being big or small in relation to being better is, in my view, irrelevant.

Whether you are big or small, you always have to be better. It is a question of always raising the bar every day of our life. When everyone in the organization agrees with that approach, it’s a fabulous enterprise.

Q: You must have been very pleased this month when Baker & McKenzie received the 2003 Pro Bono Initiative Award from the Public Interest Law Institute. Congratulations! How is pro bono work encouraged at the firm, and why do you think it is important?

A: Pro Bono is part of the curriculum of all lawyers, be they young associates or senior partners. This is encouraged through different means including allowing lawyers to take time off and to actually value that time off to serve pro bono causes, celebrating successes in pro bono matters such as the various rankings and awards that we receive, and also partnering with our key clients on pro bono initiatives. Being an accomplished team player, as we hope all our lawyers are, means also belonging to a community and serving that community which is best done through pro bono activities.

Q: Given your global responsibilities, do you have time to practice law? If so, what sorts of matters are you currently handling?

A: No, I do not practice law any more. It would be irresponsible of me and of my firm to tolerate any attempt to practice law while being the chairman of the firm. I see clients, I listen to clients and I talk to them a lot but I would not ever pretend that I am actually practicing law. The practice of law is a full-time activity; the management of the firm is also a full-time activity. I could not do both.

Q: You have a background in business as well as law, two fields notoriously dominated by strong-willed males. Not only are you a woman (people can’t help but notice), but

you are also quite young - after four years as Chairman, still only in your 40’s! In addition, you are European. Given all that is unique about you - that is, compared with the profile of the traditional American law firm chairman - do you sense any resistance on the part of your partners to follow your leadership and accept your decision-making?

A: No, because my partners are smart individuals and they are respectful of the right decision-making process and they appreciate that all individuals, irrespective of gender or color or religion, can contribute and thrive in an inspiring environment such as our firm. When they feel that a proposal is wrong, they will say so, be it to a woman or to a man. The only difference is that they might do it in more chosen terms and more politely to a woman than they would otherwise to a man.

Q: Apart from the advancements women such as yourself have made in places like America and Europe, Baker & McKenzie conducts business in many parts of the world where women face a great deal of entrenched discrimination and bigotry. Have you ever felt being a woman has hampered your ability to work as an equal with certain clients? In that regard, can you talk a bit about the firm’s policy with respect to assigning female associates to work for Islamic clients?

A: Things are changing in some places fast, such as in Asia or Latin America. There are some countries such as Indonesia, which is predominantly Islamic, where women hold leadership positions and actually lead the pack.

One of our key partners in Jakarta, for instance, is also a member of the Indonesian Security and Exchange Commission and a very accomplished practitioner. Some Middle-East countries are much more complicated, and it will take more time for



women to accomplish their potential, and to move from submission to empowerment. This is a necessary step and a key one.

Q: As we all recognize, the world has changed a lot since 9/11. The U.S. has implemented foreign policy decisions that have drawn criticism abroad. How have globetrotting Baker & McKenzie lawyers doing business in Europe, Asia or elsewhere dealt with anti-American feelings, increased security concerns or other challenges during this time of war and terrorism?

A: We are not an American firm and most of our Baker & McKenzie lawyers operating in Europe are Europeans; in Asia are Asians; in Latin America are Latin Americans. Nonetheless, our lawyers move around the world extensively including under Associate Training Programs and Staffing Programs for specific assignments. Traveling is more difficult because of increased complexities, added controls, improved security, better checkings, etc. We should not complain about it; it is a collaborative effort which is here for the long term.

Q: At a recent symposium of the International Students' Committee (ISC) in Switzerland, in discussing global uncertainty you quoted the following humorous item circulating on the Internet - "You really know that things are uncertain when: the best rappers are white; the best golfer is black; the Swiss win the America's Cup; the French actually accuse the Americans of being arrogant; and the Germans don't want to go to war." It is funny! But your point was also serious: We live in an age of global uncertainty. And things do seem a bit topsy-turvy. If recent events have brought more uncertainty to the global stage, do you think it is the job of lawyers to create at least an illusion of predictability and stability in a dangerous world?

A: Yes, very much so. Lawyers are merchants of trust, and the law as a norm should develop and maintain a sense of predictability and security that is the natural and indispensable compost for trust and developing relationships at all levels, be it amongst business people or between governments.

Q: Everyone knows Law Stars work too hard. If we may ask, do you have hobbies? What do you do for leisure and entertainment?

A: Yoga, cooking, theatre, gardening, when I have been able to spend enough of my spare time with my family.

Q: Who are your personal gurus and Law Stars?

A: Socrates, Gandhi, Robert Badinter, Justice O'Connor, Dame Brenda Hale.

Q: Thank you! Before you go, if you're so inclined, the Law Star bonus question, just for fun: What is your favorite lawyer joke?

A: St. Peter saying to a lawyer turning up at the gate: "You deserve special treatment and the red carpet." "Why is that?" says the lawyer. "Well, based on your timesheet, you're by far the oldest man to have ever turned up here."