



Power Women: Elizabeth Espín Stern
Of Mayer Brown On How To
Successfully Navigate Work, Love and
Life As A Powerful Woman





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How does a successful, strong, and powerful woman navigate work, employee relationships, love, and life in a world that still feels uncomfortable with strong women? In this interview series, called “Power Women” we are talking to accomplished women leaders who share their stories and experiences navigating work, love and life as a powerful woman.

As a part of this series, I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing Elizabeth Espín Stern, managing partner of Mayer Brown’s Washington, D.C. office.

Elizabeth leads Mayer Brown’s Global Mobility & Migration practice within the firm’s Employment & Benefits group. She has advised companies through every major immigration policy change since 1986 and focuses on issues that are unique to dynamic commercial entities with a global work force. This includes helping companies establish global compliance and management programs to move their executive and professional work corps to various locations around the world. Ms. Stern regularly speaks and writes about immigration policies, talent optimization, and diversity, equity and inclusion.

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Thank you so much for doing this with us Elizabeth! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit more. Can you tell us a bit about your childhood “backstory”?

A native of Washington, D.C., I am the daughter of Ecuadorian parents. My father, a diplomat, sensitized me to the importance of cross-cultural connections and collaboration, and I believe he set the tone for a career where I consider diverse, multicultural talent to be one of the strongest assets of an enterprise.

Can you tell us the story about what led you to this particular career path?

As a teenager, I was convinced I would become a D.C. journalist, covering global dignitaries visiting the White House, but I fell in love with the law when I took Henry Abraham’s Constitutional Law course at the University of Virginia. When I started practicing in 1986, major changes in U.S. immigration imposed new, unprecedented obligations on employers to validate the legality of employees’ work authorization, while at the same time the tech sector was burgeoning in D.C. This inspired me to launch an innovative business immigration practice in 1990. I was very focused on making mobility of talent seamless and compliant, something that remains a hallmark of my practice.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began your career?

There are many, but one that stands out is the day the chair of a major bank my firm represented called to ask if we could rescue his son’s visa case, which was at risk of denial. A young man in his 20s, the son was pursuing screenwriting in California. When I talked with him, he was just a father suffering for his son. I knew I had to help him, but the chances that this kid was a serious talent in screenwriting were slim at best. Nevertheless, I met with him, and saw the one short film he’d done that had garnered a little-know indie film award. There was something about the film—he had something. We built up a portfolio to demonstrate he had “extraordinary ability” in the arts, the minimum (and intimidating!) standard required. It took weeks but we were determined to get him



over the line. We secured the approval of his visa and ultimately got him a U.S. green card granting him permanent residency in the United States. That kid was Gideon Raff, the executive producer of the immensely successful “Homeland” series, now a two-time Emmy winner.

You are a successful business leader. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success? Can you please share a story or example for each?

Passion, tenacity and vision. I have always focused on what I am deeply passionate about. My absolute conviction that talent fuels the enterprise has kept me focused on leadership solutions that mobilize and empower the talent corps. Tenacity is essential because when you're inventing novel systems or approaches, you have to be willing to troubleshoot and redirect until you unlock the magic. It's during the R&D stage that you have to be relentless, focused, and patient—tenacity will carry you through. Vision pulls it all together. Your inventions have to respond to the changing times. I'm always curious as to where we are headed next and find the twists and turns of change to be fascinating opportunities to build new products and approaches. At this time, when the post-pandemic world is undergoing unprecedented transformation, unprecedented opportunities similarly abound.

Ok, thank you for that. Let's now jump to the primary focus of our interview. The premise of this series assumes that our society still feels uncomfortable with strong women. Why do you think this is so?

Perhaps the real issue is that women being strong is misunderstood. Is strength exclusively reflected in a tough-as-nails, aggressive approach akin to the heavyweight fighter? Or is strength reflected in the confidence of a woman who is willing to be less overt but equally determined? I've been called fearless on numerous occasions, and yet I'm also known to be unfailingly diplomatic. Can I get the job done? Yes, but it doesn't typically require a head-on collision. On the other hand, there are times you can't back down, and those may make others uncomfortable.



Without saying any names, can you share a story from your own experience that illustrates this idea?

In a prior firm, I was presented with an opportunity to hire a game-changing lateral group of attorneys. But the area of their practice was still emerging, and there were legacy leaders who did not believe their practice was likely to be successful. I had spent over three months meeting with these talented recruits, conducting a thorough diligence with the help of several trusted advisors and felt this was an opportunity we could not squander. The affirmative presentation of positive facts was not succeeding, so I had to take a more forceful stance, laying out what the costs of inaction would be. Rather than relying on my personal convictions, I presented the facts and research I'd done, appealing to the analytical bent of the audience.

What should a powerful woman do in a context where she feels that people are uneasy around her?

Uncomfortable situations typically require more elongated communications, with decisions postponed until socialization of ideas are complete. While decisions ultimately have to be made, you'll get much more buy-in if you give people time to absorb a new way of thinking or an untested course and ask for feedback and input to improve the course of action. A powerful woman who is open to input and dialog is much more likely to earn loyal followers and get the added benefit of enhanced and diverse ideas.

What do we need to do as a society to change the unease around powerful women?

We have to stop thinking in terms of zero-sum power dynamics. Shifting to a "how" rather than a "why" mentality forces us to think of how to empower women. So the question becomes, how can a strong woman bring fresh ideas to the table, make it more acceptable for all levels and backgrounds of participants to give input and compel the enterprise to evolve away from the ways it succeeded in the past? If we start asking how, we're making progress.

Let's now shift our discussion to a slightly different direction. This is a question that nearly everyone with a job has to contend with. Was it difficult to fit your personal and family life into your

business and career? For the benefit of our readers, can you articulate precisely what the struggle was?



I'm blessed with two wonderful sons, who are now in their 20s. When they were small, I was building a practice, and entrepreneurial endeavors require long hours and consistent access. I worried so much about whether I was giving enough time to our sons and family. The only way I managed it was with a large network of support. My husband was understanding and got involved. My mother was the primary caretaker, and only because of her sacrifice did I feel comfortable the boys were getting the attention they needed. All three other grandparents contributed as well, as did my sisters and brother-in-law. And for me, I learned that life was not linear—I sometimes had to leave work on the fly because one of our children had an event, skinned a knee or was sick. The unexpected became part of my routine!



What was a tipping point that helped you achieve a greater balance or greater equilibrium between your work life and personal life? What did you do to reach this equilibrium?

I heard a sermon about the importance of preserving some margin, some boundaries, in order to be an effective-enough human to even absorb faith and the virtues I care about. I realized I had to make some conscious decisions to set limits and to let people around me know I could sometimes say no. At least one “lazy pjs day” of the weekend—usually Saturday—became a staple in our house. I added bookend days around travel to be home, so I would always have extra family time to enjoy. And I made Friday a “work from home” day for

good; to this day, unless there's a very important meeting, I'm at home and having a big family dinner on Fridays.



Here is the main question of our interview. Based on your opinion and experience, what are the “Five Things You Need To Thrive and Succeed as a Powerful Woman?” (Please share a story or example for each.)

1. Confidence in Your Ability to Make a Difference. Isabel Allende said, “I can promise you that women working together, linked, informed and educated—can bring peace and prosperity to this forsaken planet.” In my experience there is no question that women empowered to share their genuine ideas and abilities enrich an enterprise. We should always have confidence that we can and do make a difference!

2. A Circle of Trusted, Informed Advisors. Surround yourself with smart people with shared values and you can achieve almost anything. Engage them, make them part of your day-to-day operations and you can multiply your capabilities. I once gave my circle four gifts: a compass, a telescope, an abacus and the scales of justice to represent their wisdom and talent, which set our direction; identified opportunities on the horizon; kept us focused on what fueled our economic engine; and maintained the integrity and fairness essential of all of our actions.

3. Respect for The Power of Communication. Only with effective communications can a leader build trust and inspire the corps. Keeping people informed, giving them encouragement, eliciting their feedback—every aspect of communications is a powerful facilitator of a mutually engaged and committed enterprise. Communications are the glue that hold an enterprise together.

4. A Commitment to Inclusion. Progress is achieved when different voices come together to identify meaningful change. The teams I am privileged to lead in my office and my practice come from different cultural, social and generational backgrounds. When we get together to brainstorm “what’s next,” it is the diversity of their perspectives that enriches our thought process and makes us 10 times more effective than we would be in a “one-size-fits-all” discussion.



5. A Sense of Humor. Sometimes, things don't work out how we expect. Challenges happen, defeats occur. A sense of humor is so important in these circumstances; it humanizes us. No one is immune to failure, so why not have a laugh, learn from it, and then move on. Laughter is actually the best medicine, and I recommend it.

We are very blessed that some very prominent names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them.

Jim Collins, Malcolm Gladwell, or Rick Warren. All three have inspired me.

Thank you for these fantastic insights. We greatly appreciate the time you spent on this.