



Facing COVID-19 With Emotional Intelligence: A “Through Her Eyes” Perspective

WRITTEN BY



JENNIFER THIBODAUX

SENIOR LEGAL EDITOR,
THOMSON REUTERS
PRACTICAL LAW AND
FOUNDER, JMT SPEAKS, LLC.

WOMEN LAWYERS JOURNAL
EDITORIAL BOARD MEMBER



KAREN SEBASKI

COUNSEL
HOLWELL SHUSTER &
GOLDBERG LLP

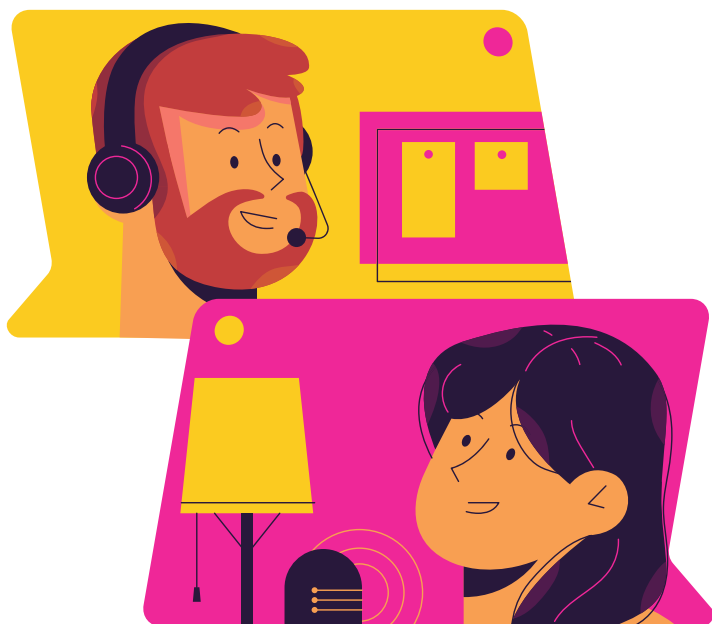
WOMEN LAWYERS JOURNAL
EDITORIAL BOARD MEMBER

One of the countless side effects of COVID-19 is the remote workplace that eliminates the line between our personal and professional lives. Lawyers are still navigating this “virtual reality” and will be for the foreseeable future. In June 2020, we interviewed three NAWL members with diverse perspectives to present a “through her eyes” account of how women lawyers are responding to the personal and professional challenges the pandemic presents.

After our interviews, we realized there is a powerful, common thread running through each woman’s story: **emotional intelligence**.^[1] We have woven their stories together to present key takeaways based on how these women rely on soft skills – like empathy, honesty, and transparency – to adapt and rise to various challenges during this unprecedented time.

Use a Personal Touch to Maintain and Strengthen Human Connections

Nikaela Jacko Redd, Vice President, Wealth Management-Legal and Compliance, Morgan Stanley, has been in private practice or in-house for over ten years. A West Coast transplant who lives in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area, she also is a mom to a school-aged son. Many of us can relate to Nikaela, who told us that the biggest change to her workday has been the lack of human interaction with her colleagues. In fact, frequent in-person interactions are the part of pre-COVID-19 life that she misses the most. Although some of the other lawyers on Nikaela’s team are based in different physical offices, she looked forward to catching up with other colleagues in the hallway or over a cup of coffee or lunch. Nikaela now strives to connect with them on a human level. She purposefully dedicates at least a few minutes at the start of virtual meetings and teleconferences to ask her colleagues about their day and to check in with them personally, for example, by asking about their children or a recent event in their personal lives. She also sets up virtual coffee breaks with friends and colleagues. **Nikaela believes that without this human element, remote professional encounters run the risk of becoming “transactional.” Instead, she strongly believes that with just a few minutes a day, we all can strengthen key personal connections.**



Jayne Jonat, a partner at Holwell Shuster & Goldberg LLP, a New York-based litigation boutique, has been in private practice for ten years and is a mom to a toddler. Jayme likewise explained that **“being a good communicator is essential when working remotely in any business, including the legal profession.”** As women lawyers, Jayme explained that we are **“exceptional communicators”** who **“build consensus across large teams”** and are **“well-poised to use those skills, even though it is particularly challenging in the current environment.”**

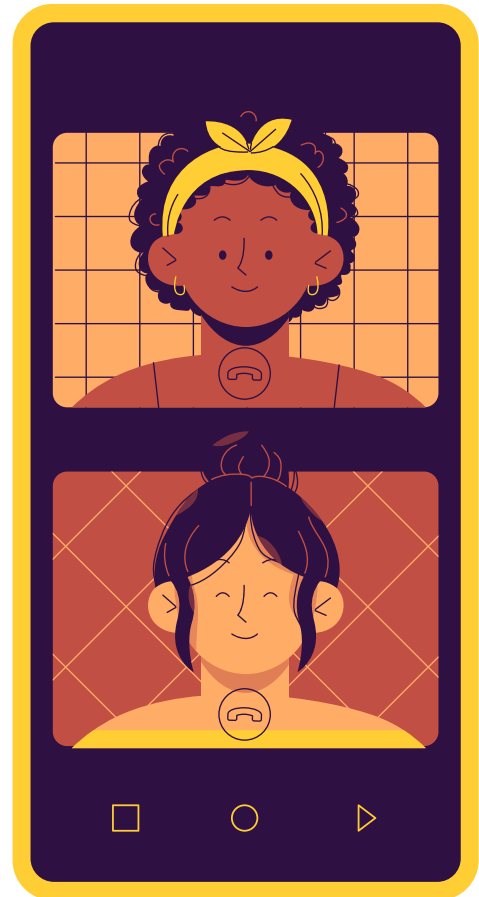
Sheila Murphy, CEO and president of Focus Forward LLC, chief leadership & talent officer of WOMN LLC, and an expert and consultant at Bates Group, likewise observed that women are good at **“focusing on the personal touch,”** and the **“personal connection is leveling the playing field.”**

Exercise Compassion and Empathy in Your Personal and Professional Lives

That personal touch is part and parcel of traits like empathy and compassion that Sheila, who retired in 2018 as Senior Vice President and Associate General Counsel at MetLife, told us are so valuable in today’s environment. For example, she observed that women lawyers often are adept at **“noticing the nuances of body language on Zoom,”** including whether any colleagues are unusually quiet and if it **“makes sense to reach out to a coworker one-on-one”** after a group call.

Sheila also highlighted the professional and personal importance of reaching out to virtual speakers and panelists as one normally would at a conference or after a legal presentation. In today’s remote environment, audience members typically are muted and often cannot be seen on video, making it particularly difficult for presenters to gauge the efficacy of their messages. As a result, Sheila explained that following up by email is well-received and **“those connections are key.”**

Nikaela practices empathy and compassion in a different way, but still relies on those soft skills to navigate this virtual environment. When she explained how she struggles with the lack of human interaction at work, she hastened to add that she feels guilty because first responders and our healthcare heroes go to work every day and put themselves at risk. She vocalized her deep respect and admiration for their sacrifice, explaining how they inspire her to focus on the positive: she is happy and lucky to have a job when there are so many others who cannot work but desperately need to do so. Despite her own feelings, which she acknowledges and values, she is still compassionate for others.



Prioritize (and Triage) Problems

For many professionals, particularly those like Nikaela and Jayme who have young children, one of the bigger challenges of the current environment is figuring how to integrate and prioritize competing work and family responsibilities, which often feels impossible.

For Jayme, this state of affairs was just the tip of the iceberg when she tested positive for COVID-19 and became sick in late March. She was simultaneously taking care of her husband, who was also sick with the virus, watching her 18-month-old son, and trying to work remotely. Although it was a difficult situation, to say the least, Jayme was mindful that it also was temporary.

In her words: **"I responded by prioritizing my and my family's health first and foremost, and I'm lucky to be part of a firm that was incredibly understanding and supportive of my need to do so."**

"Any successful lawyer (male or female) needs to take a break and ask for help sometimes, and my firm's support was critical to getting through that predicament." - Jayme Jonat

Nikaela similarly prioritizes her family during this time. Despite her demanding work schedule and the responsibilities of home, she regularly wakes up in the very early morning hours to get a jump start on her workday and then continues working late in the evening. Her husband typically travels overseas for long periods of time and is now working remotely at odd hours of the day and night. Nikaela prioritizes her family - even if it means being short on sleep at times - so they can spend as much time together as possible and so that she can take breaks throughout the day to spend time with her son or check in on him.

Sheila, whose two children now are adults, has been able to spend more time growing her new business ventures virtually. As the impact of the pandemic grew and stay-at-home orders took effect, she quickly realized that she would need to prioritize and pivot to network effectively from home. By reaching out to her closest personal and professional connections, Sheila found that key opportunities have presented themselves organically, as "people naturally want to help each other and grow."

Sheila's prioritization on shifting her business approach was successful. Three months later, she has more relationships and potential clients than ever and has remained open to remote opportunities to amplify her brand. All too often, under ordinary circumstances, it can feel like there simply are not enough hours in the day for business development dinners and after-work cocktail hours. In today's environment, Sheila prioritized her business by focusing on the ability to grow professional relationships with a quick email or Zoom call from the comfort of her own home. Indeed, Sheila thinks this is actually a unique opportunity to forge new bonds and strengthen professional relationships. "Right now, we all have this in common," said Sheila.



Our Call to Action

Without a doubt, COVID-19 has presented each of us with a unique set of personal and professional challenges. If there is a silver lining to this pandemic and its unprecedented impact, perhaps it is the daily reminder of our humanity and the commonalities that we all share. It is something to remember the next time a colleague is quiet or distracted on a Zoom call, or when we are scrambling to balance personal responsibilities with professional deadlines, virtual networking events, and other commitments. **As women lawyers, we are in a unique position to lead by example and with emotional intelligence, humility, and compassion in our interactions - both virtual and personal. So, take a deep breath and remember that we are all in this together.**