

# How I Made It to Law Firm Leadership: ‘Perceived Failure is Just an Opportunity to Learn,’ Says Mindy Yang of Proskauer

By ALM Staff

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**MINDY YANG, 46, Proskauer, New York, NY**

**Job title:** Leadership Development Officer

**Practice area:** Professional Resources Group

**Law school and year of graduation:** Fordham Graduate School of Business – 2008

**How long have you been at the firm?** August 2014.

**What year were you promoted/elected to your current role?** I started to lead this area for Proskauer in 2018 and was promoted to Leadership Development Officer in 2022.

**Were you a partner at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one, how long were you there and when did you leave?** Prior to rejoining Proskauer in my current role, I oversaw DEI for the Wealth Management Division of Morgan Stanley.

**How would you describe your career trajectory (was it organic or an active pursuit)?** Since starting out in finance in 1999, my career trajectory has evolved in unexpected ways—some opportunities were pursued with intention and others happened more organically. My natural inclination is to be open and available which has served me well.

My DEI journey began in 2007, and at the time, DEI professionals were sought out to leverage our functional expertise and perhaps lived experience. Today, there are a limited number of us who have two decades of tactical enterprise experience in overseeing a DEI strategy.

Over the years, I’ve led teams in building out DEI data collection models, and created and delivered initiatives focused on recruiting, training, and engaging historically underrepresented talent. While DEI is no longer officially part of my title, inclusion and belonging marks

every talent development decision and goal.

Currently, as Proskauer’s head of leadership development, my team and I are responsible for engaging with our talented lawyers to elevate the employee experience through professional development support, integrate new partners, and amplify our unique and special culture of belonging. It is a tall order, but I work with an excellent team that delivers every day.

**What was the biggest surprise you experienced in leading the firm’s key initiatives?** It’s not necessarily a surprise, but I have been awestruck and moved by the enormous amount of dedication and care our partners demonstrate in driving key initiatives. Two examples come to mind. While our integration strategy for laterally joining partners is bespoke and individualized, we have a tried and tested playbook of best practices that has been developed and deployed over the years. The extent to which our newly joining lateral partners have so meaningfully contributed to and positively impacted our lateral partner recruiting and integration strategy is immeasurable. They take the pay it forward concept to its greatest heights.

Upon taking on partner development responsibilities, I canvassed our newly promoted lawyers to better understand their professional development needs. Junior partners expressed a desire for structured conversations with stakeholder partners and firm leaders to discuss their legal expertise, client development strategies, and short/mid/long-term goals. This led to



Mindy Yang of Proskauer.

Courtesy photo

the Professional Development Plan (PDP), a formal process that has been embraced with vigor and creativity by new partners. I am often inspired by the commitment demonstrated by our senior partners who prepare and deliver tremendously thoughtful advice and perspectives that will set their newest partners on the right path.

**How do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?** Technology has had an enormously positive impact on our industry—from knowledge management, financial reporting, data collection, to record retention, technological innovation has improved processes to be faster and more efficient. Through the talent development lens, we learned during the pandemic that virtual trainings could be very effective with the right execution. We realized virtual trainings could serve as a great equalizer particularly for colleagues located in smaller offices yielding a greater sense of connectivity across the firm more broadly. In today's environment, we are incorporating the best practices learned and experienced over the pandemic, placing an even greater emphasis on intentional engagement, both virtual and in-person.

**What's the key to running a successful initiative in your opinion and/or what unique challenges do you face as it relates to your role?** A successful new initiative requires a good idea, feedback from those who will be impacted, flawless execution, and a look back to evaluate what worked well and what can be improved for the next go around. While one may not be able to incorporate all feedback and some feedback may even be divergent, it is important to make certain that people feel heard and that their input is appreciated. This is where trust and relationships can pay dividends.

**Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your current role?** Over the past three years, there have been seismic shifts, almost all unprecedented, in both the way business is conducted and workforce expectations of its employers. Our Chairman and Managing Partner, Steve Ellis and Daryn Grossman, have led the firm through a global pandemic, our community's response to the murder of George Floyd, anti-Asian hate crimes, a mental health crisis, the overturning of Roe v Wade, return to office, and changes in the economy. Steve and Daryn have leaned on their trusted group of advisors for which I am grateful to be a part, responded quickly when needed, made thoughtful and sometimes difficult decisions, and have

kept the Firm on a steady path. Watching them work has been a masterclass on agility and grace.

I would not be at Proskauer were it not for our former Chair Joe Leccese. When I left Proskauer for a short stint in investment banking, Joe gave a toast at my going away celebration and graciously left the door open, even predicting that I'd likely join in the company of many other Proskauer boomerangs who left only to quickly return home. He was right.

Carol Sawdye, Chief Financial Officer at Creative Artist Agency, has also been a great role model, mentor and friend. Carol was my pyramid head when I was a young finance professional. She is an authentic, self-made, holistic leader who protects and holds the value of relationships in the highest regard. Through Carol, I've learned not to fear difficult questions, that one can never be overprepared, and the importance of staying the course.

**What's the best piece of career/leadership advice you could give a partner who wants to make it to firm leadership and/or manage key firm initiatives?**

1. Empower others to lead with you. 2. Walk toward a challenge and find others with whom to lock arms and tackle things together. 3. Surround yourself with people who know how to get things done, strategy is important but implementation and execution yields results. 4. Do not become paralyzed by fear or criticism. Perceived failure is just an opportunity to learn, so fail quickly and recover even faster.

**Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to your younger self and/or what would you do differently?** I would be kinder to myself. A dozen years ago, like many new parents, I put a lot of pressure on myself to perform at the highest level at work, take on new home responsibilities, and likely set some unrealistic expectations for myself. The greatest gift I received from former directors was the trust they showed in me to manage my growing responsibilities. I am deeply committed to paying that gift forward. Sometimes, just hearing, "I know how hard this is" can make a world of difference and I try to say that to anyone in need of hearing it.

**Do you have a prediction on how the legal industry will evolve over the next several years?** I am unwavering in my position that professional services is a relationship business driven by human connectivity and interactions. I recently watched a documentary on Steve Ross, the late CEO of Time Warner (now Warner Bros. Discovery) through the early 90s. With all of

his accomplishments, and there are many, he is best known for creating an incentive-based compensation program that focused on work synergies and collaboration. He trustingly delegated responsibility to his lieutenants, found the best people for the job and got out of their way. His support and commitment to his colleagues and clients inspired deep loyalty. I admire and ascribe to this model. While AI and technology may tighten up the competition and perhaps result in less players overall, firms that fiercely protect and value relationships will continue to rise to the top.

**In your role, what programs/activities have you accomplished (and are most proud of)?** Championing women is key to Proskauer's DNA and two programs have helped to recognize Proskauer as a leader in supporting women's advancement.

Our CaRe (Caregiver Return) program has been in existence for almost a decade and allows a parent returning from an extended caregiver leave to return on a reduced work schedule for the first six months at 75% of their full-time hours while receiving 100% of their pre-leave compensation. Before the implementation of CaRe, our Proskauer Women's Alliance (PWA), the Firm's largest employee resource group, weighed in with an important provision that CaRe participation should be automatic (vs. opt-in) to remove any potential stigma for those who participate. It is the quintessential example of how stakeholder weigh-in yielded a much better initiative. I believe CaRe is a huge differentiator for Proskauer.

Our Women's Sponsorship Program (WSP) will celebrate its 10th anniversary next year. The WSP takes career development beyond traditional mentorship by pairing high performing mid-level associates with distinguished senior partners who serve as sponsors and career champions. In addition, the WSP is anchored by a year-long curriculum of substantive

professional development programming. The program has played an immeasurable role in engaging our high performing talent.

**As a firm leader, in your particular role, how would you measure success regarding the initiatives you are working on?** KPIs such as recruitment, retention, promotion statistics and industry accolades can reflect that we are moving in the right direction, and we are proud of those wins. Still, I am most motivated by and measure success through examples of a deeper sense of connectivity, engagement, and relationship building. This could be a magical moment in the cafeteria with a recently joined lateral partner who enthusiastically shares about a collaboration with a lawyer in a different practice. It could be a lasting relationship developed by participants of the WSP that spans beyond the cohort year. Success is a follow-up email from members of our Proskauer Women's Alliance who express gratitude for feeling heard and understood about an important topic. These are the real gratifying moments, and I am pleased that we have many of them.

**For career advancement advice and success stories, check out the "How I Made It" Q&A series on Law.com.**



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