**Between the Legal Lines: LaTanya Langley**

Major, Lindsey & Africa presents Between the Legal Lines, a podcast focused on leading women lawyers who have pushed beyond the boundaries and found success.

**Eliza Stoker:** Welcome to Between the Legal Lines. My name is Eliza Stoker and I am your host. This podcast is a series of monthly interviews within which we explore how women who happen to also be both executives and lawyers navigate those boundaries that get placed upon them due to their roles and their demographic.

These women have found success despite those sometimes very narrowly drawn lines that govern what is acceptable and what is not and each month we will hear a news story from a different woman about what that's like. I have someone here with me today so let's get started. Tell us who you are and what is your current role?

**LaTanya Langley:** Hi Eliza, this is LaTanya Langley and I currently serve as vice president and general counsel at Bic International, one of the best-known international brands and writing instruments lighters, shavers, and other promotional products and I'm based in the greater New York area.

**Eliza Stoker:** Thank you for that! Yeah Bic is definitely a brand name everyone recognizes and people either remember the lighters or the pens, but I feel like they have a hard time remembering both. Do you ever come across that?

**LaTanya Langley:** I do, I do at times. And people are pleasantly surprised when they find out that many of the products that they use every day is a Bic product.

**Eliza Stoker:** So tell us how you got there. How did you what do you remember about your journey to becoming general counsel at this?

**LaTanya Langley:** Well in addition to being general counsel for Bic, I thought it would be worth mentioning that I am also an influencer and a disruptor and a strategist.

And so how did I get here? I would like to say that it was a journey. It was a journey where I found out all of these things about myself based on my experiences from starting off in a large international law firm. And then moving into a larger international law firm then moving to a large regional law firm before moving in house. When I moved in house and moved to the world's largest alcohol beverage company and I worked and lived in Africa where that company which was Diageo, which eventually led me to my current role in developing markets. And I think that each of those experiences along the journey was the building block that prepared me for where I am today.

**Eliza Stoker:** All right, thank you for that. So your current role is focused on emerging markets. Is it handy to be a disrupter and an influencer and a strategist in emerging markets?

**LaTanya Langley:** That's a great question. In fact, it's a requirement. And I learned that experience by both living and working in Africa, which is one of the largest developing markets and I just had the opportunity to learn how to think differently how to find ways to sell our products and to win in a market that doesn't have clear rules to learn how to be a strategist respecting cultural norms and different ways of thinking.

**Eliza Stoker:** So through your journey and thank you for describing your journey to us, was there any one person who was particularly helpful to you in your career?

**LaTanya Langley:** One of the things that I learned in developing markets is that it always takes a village to raise someone from a child to adulthood and so it would be very hard for me to say that it was one person in particular.

In fact, there were many people that were helpful to me in my career. There were some that were negative reinforcers and there were others that were positive influences. I can start with my high school dean who ensured that I got into the best colleges and who also helped me get my first law firm summer job to the partners and senior leaders who trained me along the way and created opportunities for me.

So there were many but one that particularly stands out to me is an executive who really took the time to know and understand me the person. I thought I was his trusted advisor and his business partner and somehow he changed on me and became my trusted advisor, my business partner and he constantly encouraged me to be my authentic self, to own my ambitions, and to really think big, so he removed barriers for me and helped me realize that many of those barriers were my own. So once I own my differences and gifts and talents, I was able to sort in my career and I think he really helped establish that for me.

**Eliza Stoker:** What are some of the barriers that you felt you encountered?

**LaTanya Langley:** Myself for starters? I always grew up feeling different. I never really felt like I fit in. I mean and it started from childhood through teenage years through adulthood through my career and being different and feeling excluded cause me to try to be someone else other than myself so that I could be accepted. I would try to dress like the status quo, talk like the status quo by to get included into organizations and in clubs and groups where I thought I should be. And one day I had a conversation with the exec about feeling like, you know, I always feel very different. I don't understand why I don't fit in and he literally dropped everything and looked at me and said well own it, you know, maybe that's your gift. Maybe you're not supposed to fit in and once I actually understood the value of my difference and begin to celebrate, you know, not thinking like everyone else is the moment I realized that is what I'm supposed to be doing.

And this is why working in developing markets, living in Africa, you know working in India and Asia and all these wonderful places around the world. This is why those were the right experiences for me because those are places where people don't think like, you know, the typical American or they don't think like what is expected as social norms in the U.S. in particular. And so I've learned to value and embrace those differences and use those differences when I'm being a strategist or when I'm trying to close a deal or when I'm just trying to influence the outcome. I'm in a difficult situation.

**Eliza Stoker:** Do you ever wonder what your career would be like if you had been successful at sitting in do you think you would not have advanced as far as you have?

**LaTanya Langley:** I do not think I was ever meant to fit in. In fact, I think I was created to stand out and to be different and to think different. I believe those are my superpowers and I've learned to own those superpowers and to show up with them whenever the opportunity presents itself. Their strengths of being different will always be there and when I say being different, I don't mean just because I'm a black woman. I don't mean it that just because I'm a woman. But it's also because of the way that I think and so when I when I show up with those skills and talents and gifts, that's what helped me to become a successful and to win a certain outcome. And I don't think that my career would be where it where it is today had I've ever fit in.

**Eliza Stoker:** I love that you have superpowers and I will admit for our listeners that I know Tanya from before today and I agree that she absolutely has superpowers. Can you give us an example of how your superpowers show up at work?

**LaTanya Langley:** One thing that I think I'm very gifted at is discerning and they call it they call it spiritual discernment but not to sound religious. It really is just a way of understanding who you're speaking to, really listening to what they're saying, and also paying attention to the energies around that person. And that's a really strong skill set to have especially when you're working in developing markets to be able to listen to someone else who doesn't necessarily speak your language to be able to understand the different feelings or impressions that you may be creating when you walk into the room and to be really sensitive to that.

But also to understand that there are different ways of saying the same thing on sometimes if you just pay attention and you look into someone's eyes and you hear their voice or you know, the way that their you know, their tone you can read a lot more into a situation the what is sitting here in front of you. And I think that gift of discernment is very important when you're trying to close deals, when you're trying to influence change or when you're trying to meet with regulators or you know, you know create new rules or even to train on, you know, ethics and compliance and all the important issues that we are training on in those in those countries. I think the power of discerning is very important and it and I do think it's one of my superpowers.

**Eliza Stoker:** It doesn't sound like the boundaries that exist for you as both a woman of color and a lawyer and an executive. It doesn't sound like they've been unduly restrictive for you personally only because you have found a way to navigate them. So, but I'm curious, is there anything that you wish you were freer to do more of or less of perhaps at work?

**LaTanya Langley:** I agree that I don't currently feel any barriers in speaking my truth and being my authentic self at work and that's because I'm where I should be. I'm working at a place in a role where my profession and my passions are in sync. However in prior experiences and in my younger years, there absolutely were times when I was told I was too ambitious that I should try to blend in more and be more under the radar. That I was just expected to be a great lawyer and that's it. And that is so far from who I am. Being a great lawyer is just the foundation and I knew that I was more than just a great lawyer. And I needed to be sure that I was enrolled and allowed me to be the strategic and disruptive person that I am. I'm simply not a follower and so I knew that I couldn't remain in those positions because they required me to dim my light.

So yes, I did I do feel like I had some restrictions but I also realized that I hadn't ensure that I didn't remain in places where those restrictions were real for me.

**Eliza Stoker:** Are there restrictions that you place upon yourself so far? We've talked mostly about restrictions that may be placed upon you by others by your roll or by your demographic. And my real question is what has been the stronger influence the restraints that you place on yourself or is it restrictions placed upon you by others? But I wonder if you're the kind of person who doesn't tend to place restrictions upon.

**LaTanya Langley:** I did. When I listened to the negative influencers, the people that viewed ambition as a negative trait, When I when I tried to dim my light, it just didn't work. And so I think that I was also creating a restraint on myself because you know, and I mean let's be real here. I mean ambition for women, women of color especially is used as a negative trait.

I mean, we're told that you can sit there but don't expect to be at the head of the table. Even for women who have approached their peak, there's been a pic, you know, if you are a woman and you did the exact same things that a man has done in your position, you were unfairly seen as overly ambitious or self-serving or liability and so once I realized that I could not combat those biases at all times. I realized it was very important to wield my unique brand of power and influence in my organization. And so for me, you know, I had to learn how to recognize and use the superpowers use the talents and gifts that I was born with and own them.

And many times it's important to just understand it's okay to use multiple intelligences and it's okay to be authentic and once you own that, the restraint is gone.

**Eliza Stoker:** You may have already answered this at least in part. But what advice would you offer to similarly ambitious women about how to navigate the workplace?

**LaTanya Langley:** Three things I would say are critical for ambitious women one is, you know, understand your value proposition. Your value proposition demonstrates how your work and the way you do your work contribute to a specific business outcome. Once you identify what your value proposition is, then you can understand how you can contribute to the success of a business.

It allows you to position yourself as someone who could help the business move forward and that's necessary for effective self-promotion. Then you learn confidence you realize what your unique contribution will be and then you can build influence. And build mutual beneficial relationships in the workplace.

The second one is make sure you have a supportive network of allies and champions in the workplace. No career is built in a vacuum. So you can get support and encouragement from many strategic relationships. Those relationships can begin when you walk in the morning and there's someone that's cleaning, you know, cleaning the office you can get influence from executives in the c-suite.

I mean it comes from every area if you just pay attention and people will advocate for you and they will help sell your initiative and help you build influence. A lot of times you don't even have to do it yourself. Your network will help you navigate through the politics and the complexities of the workplace and that helps reduce your frustration when it when it when it shows its face. So allies and champions can open up doors to new opportunities as long as you work your long-term plan and build that strong network.

And then lastly, just be courageous. Be you and be unapologetically you. Never, never, never try to fit in, never change who you are because you have something that's very unique about you and that is the one thing that you need to learn how to show the world. That's your competitive edge.

**Eliza Stoker:** You mentioned building a strong network of allies. And who are your allies and what do they tend to look like? Are they men? Are they women? Who are your allies?

**LaTanya Langley:**  I have allies from I think every area. I mean, some of my best allies are people that I grew up with and played, you know softball with as a child and they're still in my hometown. Some are you know, the cleaning people in the office that give me encouragement at night when I'm sitting there trying to struggle through a particular issue. Then I have others who are who are in the c-suite and in the boardroom that are you know, creating opportunities and removing roadblocks for me. You know, allied come in all shapes sizes and forms and you have to make sure that you have a diverse set of loud allies.

In particular, I have a board of directors. And that board of directors consists of girlfriends, you know heads of organizations, teachers, coaches, it's diverse because I constantly need people around me that one can remind me of where I started, people that can help me where I currently am, and then people who know where I'm going. And that it just comes full circle.

**Eliza Stoker:** So, where are you going?

**LaTanya Langley:** Going that's very interesting question. I believe that wherever I'm going and I cannot say today exactly where that is, but I know wherever it is, it will absolutely be guided by my passions, my intuition, and my skills and my gift. I think that I'm everything I'm navigating and trying to figure out you know, what's next. But currently I am just growing every single day and I'm ensuring that I'm building a pipeline for those who are coming up through the ranks and I'm creating opportunities and development opportunities for my mentee and young lawyers. And so it's not really about where I'm going but it's about who I who am I helping along the way and then I think the rest will figure itself out.

**Eliza Stoker:** Who are your mentees? How do you select people to help in their career?

**LaTanya Langley:** My mentees are really those who are ambitious and who are trying to figure out where they want to be in life. So I have some who are in high school. I have others who are in my church. Then there are some young lawyers that I have regular meetings with and discussions with who are trying to figure out their next step in their career. And then I also have other GCs who have been enrolled for less than three years.

I actually have a sister circle that meets on a quarterly basis where we all talk about the experiences that we are going through and how we can help and encourage each other and grow in our current rules. So mentoring not only you know is vertical but it's also horizontal. I'm enjoying helping to grow the pipeline and to ensure that that pipeline is diverse.

**Eliza Stoker:** Do you superheroes recognize each other? Are there other superheroes at work and when you encounter them, what's it like?

**LaTanya Langley:** Absolutely. I am surrounded by superheroes at my current job and awful and many of the other prior jobs that I've worked in and we all recognize each other. And the beauty of it is that we always try to ensure that we are uplifting each other. And that we are protecting each other, you know, whenever we see man flaming or the man interrupted. We always you know help each other out. But more than anything else we are we are entering each other, training each other, and coaching each other because some have gifts that others do not. And so we try to share some of the tools that we have picked up along the way and it really really helps, you know, in terms of growth as women leaders in this profession and also in corporate America.

**Eliza Stoker:** You mentioned mansplaining and manterrupting. What's the best comeback you've heard in that situation?

**LaTanya Langley:** I have many. Only because I have experienced it many times and I know that a number of women leaders experience this as well. In fact that I keep a lift that I called the triple bind. Some people call it the double bind list where it sort of lists out behaviors that women do and that are viewed differently.

So for example, you know if you are, you know assertive. Then you're considered yeah, you're being too bossy. If you are ambitious, you know, your competitive one other one, that's funny is you know, if she's if he sticks to his guns, you know, he's promoted for that but a woman is due to stubborn. If a man wants to get it right he's looked up to and respected if a woman wants to get it right, she's difficult and impossible. So I think that some of the comebacks that have been effective are when a man for example repeats some idea that was just articulated by a woman in the room. And then all the other men go to jump on that. You know Bobby that was such a great idea. So let's continue talking about that idea that I raised, you know are finding a way to sort of bring it back and remind people in the room that it was your initial idea and also complimenting him on him bringing that idea forward so it doesn't have to be confrontational but it definitely has to be called out.

**Eliza Stoker:** You refer to double and triple binds. Can you define for me what the difference is?

**LaTanya Langley:** Yes, so double bind is the one that most people are familiar with and that's when you know, if a woman does a particular behavior that a man does, she's actually penalized for that behavior. So if a woman behaves in a feminine way, you know, she may be liked but not necessarily respected. If she operates in a masculine way, she may be judged for that. You know, if a woman adapted a masculine approach, others may judge her. Who does she think she is? When a man is commanding, a woman is demanding. When a man is forceful, a woman is viewed as pushy. That's the double bind. The triple bind is a more unfamiliar concept where women and women of color actually deal with the same biases, but the biases have this additional negative perception attached to it.

So for example, a woman of color could be labeled as diva or angry or bitter. There's an angry black woman concept about there and none of those things are considered positive attributes from speaking up would maybe consider too bold or too intimidating and women who speak up have a woman of color who speak up have a harder time than our white female counterpart who do the same thing. They have to work ten times harder. So for example, some white women are given advice speak up, be assertive, associated, engage your team, confident, self-promote. Whereas women of color are told to tone it down. Don't be too aggressive, be more diplomatic, try not to be intimidating watch your attitude and your body language.

In other words, as a woman being assertive and confident and sexy. But if you're African-American, not too much. So that's the triple bind. And so as women as women leaders and women of color leaders, you just have to be aware of those biases and ensure, you know, that those biases don't become roadblocks or barriers as we discussed earlier.

**Eliza Stoker:** So what do you think the formula is like how given what you've just described which sounds very difficult to overcome. How do you explain your success? Is there something special that you did? How did you overcome that triple bind you just explained to us?

**LaTanya Langley:** Yes, I don't necessarily think you can overcome biases per se, but what I think you can do is be your authentic self at all times.

You have to be bold. You have to be fearless. The journey is not easy. Right, you can challenge the attacks on women and women of color, but at the end of the day you learn how to navigate in that field. But you can't really overcome it. Right? It's always going to be unless the world becomes run by all women.

You're never going to be able to overcome it. But you can navigate through it. You can learn how to process things. You can learn how to celebrate your differences in your authenticity. You can learn how to have your presence be appreciated vs. tolerated. Right and by again creating those relationships. Relationships are everything.

And when people learn to understand you and people learn to accept you and appreciate what value you bring. Then you're able to navigate through those biases. So while we cannot overcome all the biases that we can't come back all biases. Women leaders, we can wield our unique brand of power and influence our organizations and demonstrate how our work in the way. We do our work contributes to the specific positive business outcomes.

**Eliza Stoker:** I want to return for a moment to your superpowers Latonya, the influencer LaTanya, the disruptor LaTanya the strategist who's the most powerful of those three. I believe that I am a nice mix of all three. I think that the influencer comes out stronger in different situations as does the disruptor and the strategist.

It really depends on what it is that I am task to do that day or whatever that challenge is, it will require all three or maybe two of the three. So, I think that each one has a different strength at a different time.

If you had a superhero name, what would that mean be?

**LaTanya Langley:** My superhero name would likely be Desiderata.

**Eliza Stoker:** Oooh!

**LaTanya Langley:** And Desiderata is a very famous poem that's written by Max Vermin and it basically says, you know remember what peace there may be in silence as far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly and listen to others because they too have their story.

And then it tells you to avoid vexatious spirits. It says do not compare yourselves with others. And it says enjoy your achievements as well as your plan. You have to read the poem. It's an amazing amazing poem but more than anything I think that the name Desiderata fits very well with me as my super woman name.

**Eliza Stoker:** LaTanya, I want to thank you so much for participating in this conversation with me. I've learned a lot. You gave some terrific advice not just for our listeners but advice that I myself can take and put into action. I loved meeting LaTanya the superhero and learning more about your superpowers.

And I agree, I think those are super powers and the fact that you have your own set of mentees that you are influencing I think is a beautiful thing and I hope they advance as far as they're in their careers as you have. I want to thank our listeners also for joining us today. We will be back next month with a different interview.

If you would like to be interviewed for Between the Legal Lines, please contact me at stoker@mlaglobal.com. My name is Eliza Stoker and I am your host.

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