

# LAWDRAGON

## Elite, But Not Elitist: How Chair Jami McKeon Has Shifted and Shaped the Culture at Morgan Lewis

*By Meghan Hemingway*



When Jami McKeon stepped into the role of Chair at Morgan Lewis in 2014, she didn't ease in – she redefined what bold leadership in Big Law looks like. Just six weeks into the job, she led the firm through one of the most consequential lateral acquisitions in legal industry history: the strategic integration of more than 750 lawyers and staff from the dissolving Bingham McCutchen.

"I saw the risks that others saw, but I also saw alignment," McKeon says. "With our experience bringing in the Brobeck firm, I knew we could do this and that the Morgan Lewis culture would carry through. And it has."

Eschewing a traditional merger, McKeon engineered a tailored expansion that preserved Morgan Lewis' cultural DNA while transforming its size, scope and competitive position overnight. It was a defining moment, one that set the tone for a chairmanship marked by clarity, emotional intelligence, authenticity and conviction.

“Early on, I realized I couldn't succeed by pretending to be someone I wasn't,” says McKeon. “When I started practicing law, women were told to dress like men and not talk about kids or personal lives. That was never going to work for me.”

Over the past decade, McKeon has quietly become one of the most influential law firm leaders of the modern era. Under her stewardship, Morgan Lewis has expanded from a respected national firm into a global legal powerhouse, with over 2,000 lawyers across 17 time zones and more than 30 offices. She has guided the firm through moments of immense change – from economic shifts to social reckonings – bringing steady, human-centered leadership to every challenge.

McKeon's legacy isn't just about global reach or financial performance. It's about the culture she's built and safeguarded – one rooted in humility, cohesion and a deep sense of belonging. She has modernized the internal architecture of the firm with initiatives aimed at building a collaborative, inclusive and people-centric culture.

“If you really want to get to the core, this firm is 4,000 people around the world who all wake up in the morning wanting to do meaningful work to help other people and support the people they love. Our job in leadership is to help them do that. So everything I do is intended to empower their success,” says McKeon, an honoree in [The 2025 Lawdragon 100 Managing Partners You Need to Know](#). “And we need them all and recognize their importance. Elite, but never elitist. That's the culture we uphold.”

As McKeon embarks on the final year of her extended term, she sat down with Lawdragon to reflect on her journey – from young associate to the first woman to lead the firm in its more than 150-year history – and to discuss what it means to lead with purpose, grace and vision in a world that refuses to stand still.

**Lawdragon:** You've been with Morgan Lewis for four decades. What was it about the firm that initially made you want to jump on board?

**Jami McKeon:** When I interviewed at law firms, Morgan Lewis was the only one where people talked to one another in the halls. When a partner from the labor group introduced you to an associate in the corporate group, they were already familiar with each other. The person pushing the mail cart was not only recognized by the most senior partner in the firm, but they acknowledged each other in return. It was a place where everybody was part of the community. I was young at the time, but I knew that for some reason I felt more comfortable at Morgan Lewis than anywhere else. I realized it was a place where people valued being part of something meaningful. Even before I joined Morgan Lewis, the culture was very much about being on the same team. As we've grown to 10 times the size from when I started, we've preserved that core culture because it matters to us. We're intentional about reinforcing it.

People often talk about organizational culture like it's a “program,” but think about your family. You just grow up in it, observing and absorbing. If it doesn't fit, you might pull away

and do things differently. But if it does, you carry it forward because it reflects what you value. People say creating culture is hard; I think changing it is the real challenge. Maintaining culture? That takes care and consistency, but it's not as difficult as people make it out to be. You just can't lose sight of what keeps it alive.

**“ People say creating culture is hard; I think changing it is the real challenge.**

**LD:** You've had such a major hand in reinforcing and modernizing the culture at Morgan Lewis. Tell us how it's different today compared with when you walked in the door?

**JM:** When I joined, there were no women partners, no maternity leave policy, and people in the industry sometimes still called you "honey" or "dear." But even then, I always felt that I could succeed here, that I could truly be myself here. I was trusted, sent into court and treated like part of the team. I never felt like I didn't count. The world has changed a lot since then, and we've grown with it – making real and intentional progress on authenticity, belonging, broader perspectives and work-life integration. I think we've done that well. But the core has stayed the same – from day one, you're on the team. We don't set people up to fail, we support them to succeed. That was true for me, even back then. Our firm mantra is “there is no limit to what we can achieve as long as no one cares who gets the credit.” That is not true of very many firms. Despite its traditions, Morgan Lewis was more inclusive and accepting than you'd expect from an old-line Philadelphia firm. I was lifted up and thrived in that atmosphere.

**LD:** When did you feel like you found your feet at the firm as a litigator?

**JM:** I never felt like, "I am crushing it. I'm a huge success." But over time, even as an associate, I had opportunities to take on more responsibilities. As a mid-level to senior associate, I frequently was in court for a case involving our client Grant Broadcasting, and I had my first client hire me from seeing me in a courtroom. Despite this, I still wasn't sure I would make partner until it happened. Becoming a junior partner felt like graduating from middle school. Suddenly, you're a freshman again, starting all over. Each new responsibility felt like a fresh start, but that's how you grow. Whether I was in court as a senior associate, leading litigation, or becoming Chair, it was always about helping others succeed, too.

**LD:** You never rested on your success. You kept striving.

**JM:** I think that's right, although I'm not sure I would have put it that way. The world is always changing, and so we all have to be looking ahead and adapting to that. Lawyers need to do that as a business imperative because we have to be ready not only for what's on the horizon for us, but for what's on the horizon for our clients. So it's natural to keep striving. My husband used to say to our kids who were athletes the same thing at the end of the night after each game – whether they had a good game or a bad game: “Tomorrow when you wake up, your job is the same. Get up and do your best to make it a great day for

you and your team.” And I think you could just look at America’s last seven months to see how fast and how powerfully things can change. So in that way, yes, I keep striving.

**LD:** Can you walk us through how you first stepped into the role of Chair?

**JM:** I was elected in 2013, and the official transition was October 2014, but my term really began in February of 2014. After I presented my strategic plan to our advisory board, Fran [Milone, Chair at the time] kindly said, “You’ve got this. Call if you need me, but you’re ready.” By halfway through our fiscal year, I was flying solo. The Bingham opportunity came up in the spring, so I navigated that with my new team, and we closed six weeks after I officially took the role.

One of my biggest hesitations in accepting the role was that my first five years as Chair would overlap with my youngest two kids finishing high school. They were in eighth and ninth grade at the time. But when it came time for the second term, they were in college, and I thought, “This will be great. I’ll have more flexibility, and my husband can travel with me.” I expected the second five years would be smooth sailing. Then, six months in, Covid-19 hit. Suddenly, I was back home, the kids were home, and I was running the firm during a global pandemic. It definitely wasn’t the easy five years I had imagined, but there were great achievements in that window professionally and personally, and I am so proud of how the firm navigated that.

When I look back over the last decade – George Floyd, the pandemic, geopolitical upheaval – there’s been no coasting. And I don’t say that negatively. It’s just that there’s been no playbook. You don’t figure it out once and then just cruise. That’s not the world we’ve been living in.

**“ There’s been no playbook. You don’t figure it out once and then just cruise. That’s not the world we’ve been living in.**

**LD:** What do you think has contributed most to your incredible success as Chair?

**JM:** These days, it’s almost unpopular to say women bring something different to leadership, but I believe they do. When I became Chair, I led differently than those before me. Because of my experience, I think I was more focused on the personal lives, feelings and needs of our people. When I was an associate, the firm didn’t need to prove anything to you. Inclusion, empathy and emotional needs weren’t part of the conversation. That is clearly different now. What used to be dismissed as “soft skills” – listening, compassion, communication, relationship-building – are now seen as vital for effective leadership. For a long time, those were considered “women’s strengths” but weren’t valued. It was assumed men were better at business, while women were good with people – a mindset that sidelined women.

I've always seen these as leadership skills, not exclusive to women, but often developed by them due to socialization. In recent years, more men have embraced them, too, so it's less of a gender divide. But for a long time, women had these tools, and no one saw them as assets. I brought these qualities to leadership because the times demanded it, and now, those skills matter.

**LD:** You've led with such a personal, connected style. Was that a conscious choice from the start?

**JM:** At the time, it didn't seem that remarkable, but in hindsight, it was. I could choose to try to imitate the style of my predecessors or lean into my authentic leadership style and strengths. One thing I love about Morgan Lewis is that I could always be myself here, and that continued in my role as Chair. My style was always more personal, more involved with people, more hands-on. That's partly who I am and partly the result of coming up in a world where succeeding meant doing things differently. I don't know if you saw *The Crown* on Netflix, but Margaret Thatcher cooking for her cabinet members? That is more my style. I talked about my kids, brought them to the office, cooked for people. You can do all that *and* be a sharp, effective, highly successful business leader. Leading doesn't need to be cold or transactional. And what I'm seeing from young lawyers is not that they don't want to work hard – which seems to be the prevailing narrative – it's that if they're going to give us all the hours we need, they want to know we care about the other parts of their lives, too, and we want to help them attain all their goals. So I care about what's going on with their families—because it's important to them, and they're important to me. That's just how I lead.

But leadership also needs to evolve. I've been very clear, when my time is up, it's up. Like Washington in the Broadway show *Hamilton* – it's time to go. Organizations need different leaders for different moments. I was the right person for the Bingham deal, for Covid-19, for George Floyd, and for conversations around belonging and inclusion. But that doesn't mean I will be the right person for what's next, and that's exactly why it's important to step aside.

**LD:** What strengths do you imagine you'll be passing on, and what challenges do you think your eventual successor will face?

**JM:** Our biggest strength is the depth and breadth of our practices. Few firms our size have top-tier litigation, corporate, intellectual property, and asset management teams *and* best-in-class labor and employment, patent prosecution, employee benefits, antitrust, mega-deals and class actions – all on a global scale. Most of our top 200 clients work with us across *at least* six practice areas and 12 offices. That's real stickiness. We also bring a personal, client-focused style. Clients don't just stick with us because of our elite work, they actually like working with us! This combination of breadth, consistency, and culture is rare and what sets us apart.

Internally, we've built a culture people want to stay in. I usually don't put much stock in rankings, but being ranked repeatedly by our associates as #1 in quality of work, mentoring, training and pro bono means a great deal to me because it comes from our own people. That kind of engagement is genuine, and it makes us better lawyers as well as a place people want to come and want to stay.

The next Chair's challenge will be to sustain our culture while continuing to grow and adapt. Running a firm of this size isn't like running a boutique. Communicating with more than 750 partners across time zones and practice areas is much more complex than walking into a single room. And this is all unfolding amid dynamic global politics and during the rise of AI, which I think are the two biggest forces reshaping the legal industry. The next leader must be prepared for that, and I have no doubt that they will be.

***“ I want every single person in the firm to learn what AI can do, how to use it, and how to explain it to clients. AI will change the world, including how we practice law.***

**LD:** How is Morgan Lewis approaching the adoption of AI in the legal profession?

**JM:** We've been focused on staying ahead of that game for a long time. Twenty-five years ago, we started an eData practice, which most firms were outsourcing at the time. And now for us, it's a \$100M practice. Similarly, we've been using AI since its early days, integrating it into our processes. We are in a strategic AI partnership with Thomson Reuters, who initially planned to invest \$100M annually in AI, a figure that has since doubled. And I thought: We want to be a part of this. We want to define the future. Through this partnership, we test the AI products, provide input and feedback, and ensure AI supports our work.

I have always focused on making this a digitally fluent organization. As of August 1, 100 percent of our lawyers are credentialed in CoCounsel Core, the latest version of TR's genAI assistant, and we're focusing on getting our professional staff credentialed next. I want every single person in the firm to learn what AI can do, how to use it, and how to explain it to clients. AI will change the world, including how we practice law. While I cannot predict exactly how, it will require a Chair who is creative, innovative and open to experimentation. In an AI-driven world, you have to fail fast. You can't just move at the slow pace many law firms have traditionally followed when it came to new technology.

**LD:** How do you approach leadership through such changing times?

**JM:** You have to stay balanced but also be willing to do the hard work, make decisions and push them forward. Everything carries risk. Not acting is a risk. Acting is a risk. Moving forward or backward, growing or shrinking, every direction carries risk. There's no risk-free path, only choices about which risks you take. To lead through that, you must do your

homework, understand the stakes, and communicate clearly and persuasively why you're making those choices. Then, you have to earn the trust and support to follow through. The Bingham combination is a perfect example. Many firms hesitated, fearing it was too risky. We put in the hard work, and I had deep confidence in our team, and they reciprocated that confidence. Having the support of everyone involved helped me own that decision fully and dedicate myself to making it a success.

I've always felt fortunate to benefit from the Morgan Lewis culture of goodwill and grace. No one threw rotten tomatoes my way when I started. Instead, my partners supported me and gave me room to grow into the role and succeed. That kind of environment, where people are willing to take a chance and trust leadership, is absolutely essential.

**LD:** What's next for you after this role?

**JM:** I'm fully focused on leading the firm through these complex times. I've turned down other opportunities to give this role everything. When the time comes, I'll explore what's next, but for now, this is where I want to be. If this is all I ever do, that's enough. And I'll be running through the tape until the last day.



[www.lawdragon.com](http://www.lawdragon.com)