

Women of CMCP Forum: Defining Moments: Career-Changing Decisions from General Counsel and Managing Partners

California Minority Counsel Program

2026 Women of CMCP Summit

Date & Time: Tuesday, April 21, 2026, 11:15 am - 12:45 pm

Title: Women of CMCP Forum: Defining Moments: Career-Changing Decisions from General Counsel and Managing Partners

Session Description: Senior women leaders are often praised for resilience—but rarely given space to interrogate *when* resilience serves us and *when* it silently costs us. In this candid, experience-driven conversation, distinguished general counsel and managing partners explore how to distinguish “hard but healthy” professional challenges from environments that signal deeper structural or cultural misalignment.

Designed for attorneys at all career stages, this session offers early-to-mid-career lawyers a rare opportunity to learn how experienced leaders think about career decisions long before the stakes are highest. Panelists will unpack how to recognize objective indicators versus temporary stress, imposter syndrome, or early-career self-doubt; how career stage, identity, and personal priorities shape what “worth it” looks like; and how to evaluate whether a role, team, or organization is helping you build the skills, credibility, and trajectory you want.

For those who have faced pivotal decisions—whether choosing to stay, push through, or move on—panelists will share what they learned, what they might have done differently, and how early awareness can prevent misalignment later. This session reframes reassessment not as failure or flight, but as a strategic leadership skill—equipping attendees with practical frameworks to make thoughtful, values-aligned career choices with greater clarity, confidence, and agency

Panelists:

- Alyson Cabrera (Gordon Reese)
- D'Lonra Ellis (Athletics Baseball Club and San Jose Earthquakes)
- Irene Liu (Stanford Law School)

Moderator: Marie Ma (Articulate)

CA MCLE: 1.0 HR in Recognition and Elimination Bias

OUTLINE:

Subtopic 1 – The Hidden Costs of Resilience

- Resilience is often expected - and often rewarded in our profession. When have you seen it start to work against you, either in your own experience or in people you've led?
- What were the signals that something wasn't right - whether that showed up as health, boundaries, stalled progression, or something else.

Subtopic 2 – Healthy Challenge vs. Misalignment

- How do you personally distinguish between a challenge that's helping you grow and one that's actually a misalignment with your values, goals, or trajectory?
- What are the most reliable signals you've learned to look for - either that something is worth pushing through or that it's time to reassess?

Subtopic 3 – Strategic Pivots (Stay vs. Leave)

- Can you share a moment where you made a deliberate decision to leave a role - and what made it clear to you that it was time?
- On the other side, can you share a moment where you chose to stay - and what told you it was still worth investing in that role or environment?
- You've been at your firm for a long time—what has your internal barometer looked like over the years to make sure you're continuing to choose to stay, not just defaulting to it?

RESOURCES AND CITATIONS

These resources provide data and frameworks to help identify how bias influences career evaluation, advancement, and decision-making.

I. Structural Bias, Attrition & Workplace Culture

"Losing Our [Best] Minds: Addressing the Attrition Crisis of Women Lawyers"

California Lawyers Association & California Women Lawyers

A foundational California study examining burnout, structural inequities, and the disproportionate attrition of women and women of color.

Available at: calawyers.org

“Building Resilience in the Legal Workplace”

California Lawyers Association – Health & Wellness Committee

A CLE program reframing resilience as an organizational responsibility rather than an individual burden.

Available at: calawyers.org / LinkedIn

Joan C. Williams – *Bias Interrupted: Creating Inclusion for Real and for Good*

A leading framework for identifying and interrupting systemic bias patterns in professional environments.

II. Resilience, Competence & Leadership

“The Resilient Attorney: Protecting Competence and Elevating Leadership”

Beverly Hills Bar Association (Modern Lawyer)

Connects resilience, burnout, and California Rule of Professional Conduct 1.1 (competence), reframing reassessment as a leadership obligation.

Available at: bhba.org

Deborah Rhode – *Women and Leadership*

A seminal work on gender, power, and the structural barriers that shape leadership trajectories.

III. Career Evaluation, Decision-Making & Strategic Pivots

Pathway to Partnership Podcast (Cecilia Poullain)

Candid discussions about staying, leaving, recalibrating, and redefining success inside law firms.

Available on Apple Podcasts.

Herminia Ibarra – *Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader*

Insight into identity shifts, leadership transitions, and how professionals reassess roles and environments.

IV. Practical Bias Recognition Tools

ABA Commission on Women in the Profession – *Visible Invisibility* Reports

Data-driven analysis of the experiences of women of color in law firms, including bias patterns, advancement barriers, and retention challenges.

Available at: judicialstudies.duke.edu

Joan C. Williams – Bias Interruption Tools (Workplace Evidence-Based Interventions)

Practical strategies for identifying biased systems and redesigning processes to reduce inequity.