



Designing a Circle of Trust: From Surface Connections to Sisterhood

California Minority Counsel Program

2026 Annual Business Conference

Date & Time: Friday, September 25, 2026, 10:45 AM - 12:15 PM

Title: Women of CMCP Forum: Designing a Circle of Trust: From Surface Connections to Sisterhood

Session Description: Standard networking advice tells us to find mentors and sponsors, but it rarely talks about the informal "whisper networks" and fierce sisterhood alliances that actually sustain women in the trenches. This session deconstructs how to build a literal "board of directors" comprised of peers and allies who will protect your name, validate your experiences, and pass you opportunities when you aren't in the room.

This session aims to transition participants from surface-level networking to building highly tactical, protective peer alliances. Through an intimate panel discussion and interactive breakout circles, attendees will walk away with actionable strategies to cultivate a personal "board of directors", a toolkit to leverage informal "whisper networks" to safely navigate workplace politics, and immediate, authentic connections with other women in the room.

Panelists:

- Yesenia Gallegos, Partner, McDermott Will & Schulte LLP
- Shaela Lawson, Director, Inclusion Strategy, Netflix
- Preeti K. Singh, Head of Insurance Legal/Risk Consulting Leader, Google

Moderator: Camille Vasquez, Managing Partner, Sheppard Mullin

CA MCLE: 1.0 Hour General Credit

Outline

Topic 1: The Myth of the Mentor

- Without naming names, describe one woman — a peer, not a superior — who changed your career trajectory by being in your corner. What did she do?
- What do women actually need that a traditional mentor-mentee relationship doesn't provide?

Topic 2: The Whisper Network

- What kind of information travels through whisper networks, and why does it matter for women specifically?
- Whisper networks can be protective but also exclusionary. How do we avoid replicating the gatekeeping we're trying to dismantle?

Topic 3: Advocacy When It Costs You Something

- What does it actually look like to protect someone's name in a room they're not in?
- How do you weigh the risk of advocacy against the obligation to the women coming behind you?

Resources and Citations

- *Forget Mentors — You Should Build a Circle of Advisers* (Harvard Business Review) (<https://hbr.org/2022/06/forget-mentors-you-should-build-a-circle-of-advisers>)
- *Losing Our [Best] Minds: Addressing the Attrition Crisis of Women Lawyers* (CLA & California Women Lawyers Joint Study) (calawyers.org)
- *How Law Firms Can Retain Top Female Talent By Supporting Their Dual Roles* (American Bar Association) (https://www.americanbar.org/groups/law_practice/resources/law-practice-today/2024/november-2024/how-law-firms-can-retain-top-female-talent-by-supporting-their-dual-roles/)
- *How To Retain More Women in Law Firms* (American Bar Association) (<https://www.americanbar.org/groups/journal/articles/2021/how-to-retain-more-women-in-law-firms/>)
- *A Seat at the Table: Modern Career Paths for Women of Color Lawyers* (ABA Young Lawyers Division/ABA OnDemand Webinar) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Vf5X0Hb_DI#:~:text=A%20Seat%20at%20the%20Table%3A%20Modern%20Career,way%20to%20be%20successful%20as%20a%20lawyer.)
- *The Memo: What Women of Color Need to Know to Secure a Seat at the Table* (Book by Minda Harts)