

I have been with Prime Policy Group for nearly 20 years, in-house, as a consultant and now back in-house. Over the years, I've been fortunate to work on very exciting client issues, often representing some of the most pressing foreign policy issues of the day. Within one week of being hired back in 1996, I found myself whisked off on a trip to West Africa, where the mission was to help a government bring about a first-ever multi-party election process, complete with foreign observer delegations, international media and visiting congressional staffers. If I was in a bit over my head on that first trip, I was determined not to let anyone know. I put my head down, tried to stay meticulously organized, hoped our plan would work out and hoped we wouldn't lose any foreign or domestic observers. Somehow, we pulled it off. That first election led to many other international assignments – El Salvador, Maldives, Venezuela, Ukraine, South Africa, Vietnam, Lebanon, Georgia, Liberia, Kazakhstan, just to name a few -- it's been a fascinating ride.

Before Prime, I tried for nearly six months to get my first boss to hire me (someone fresh out of the Reagan Administration). He was doing very timely international work and I wanted to be part of it. He finally relented. I started out as the office manager and quickly worked my way up. At the risk of aging myself – this was when you got the paper copy of a newspaper in the morning and cut out clips related to your work. If I did it wrong, or missed one, he told me. But the work was so exciting. We wrote floor speeches in support of Angolan freedom fighters and we visited the Hill to tell stories about how Saddam Hussein was starving and killing the Kurdish people. I learned a lot about Washington, D.C. and the world in that first job. I learned how to fight to get your client's voices heard. I learned what it meant to do a job right the first time. That first assignment paid off in spades.

I learned some key lessons over the years, which are worth sharing here. Let your good instincts and your common sense guide you. Don't be afraid to get your hands dirty. Really get to know your clients and their issues on a personal level. Be passionate about your work and let that passion show. Go the extra mile. If someone calls you, always call them back, even if to say you can't be of help. Go about your daily to-do list like the end result matters, don't just go through the motions. Learn how to talk to someone on the phone and get them to say yes to your request. I find persuasion to be a lost art! Read the front page of a few well-respected newspapers every day and dig deeper on issues that interest you. Build a strong network of contacts in your field of interest – in fact never stop building and nurturing that network.

As a woman working in the international sphere, and particularly if much of your work has focused on the developing world as mine has, don't be surprised if you will have to work twice as hard to earn the respect of some (not all) of your clients. This remains a cold, hard fact. I take it as a challenge. But, for each client I have had to work doubly hard to prove myself for, there were others that were, instantly, a pleasure to work with. During Women's History Month it only seems natural to pay homage to two of the bravest women I have ever met, and with whom I was very proud to work: Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. We helped President Johnson-Sirleaf during her first campaign for the Presidency of Liberia and her bravery never ceased to amaze me. Madam Bhutto was, hands down, one of the bravest people I have ever met. I had the privilege of working very closely with her in support of her bid to return to Pakistani politics. She knew the dangers she was facing, but she never backed down and, sadly, lost her life standing up for her beliefs and for the people of Pakistan.

One final bit of advice, don't become too self-righteous. In the lobbying world, I like to say that "it's not always the choir boys that need our support." If you can help folks move in the right direction, it's worth trying. If you aren't afraid to navigate outside your comfort zone, you'll learn a lot along the way. I know I have.