

# A SUPPORTIVE COMPANY CULTURE IS VITAL TO WORKPLACE DIVERSITY

**A**n inclusive and supportive company culture is foundational to ensuring diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I). It is not just a box you check but instead must be embedded throughout the organization. Over the last two years, more than 70% of BGO's new recruits have been women and minorities, exceeding our own internal goals for diverse hiring.

We sat down with Dara Friedman and Sarah Schwarzschild about their experience as women in leadership and how BGO's company culture is defining a new era in workplace diversity.



Friedman Family



Dara Friedman

*What challenges have you overcome to grow your influence and position as a leader at BGO and previous companies?*

**Dara Friedman:** I have been lucky in that I can't recall a time in my career when I didn't feel supported. As a woman in business, however, becoming a mother has been by far my biggest professional challenge and growth experience. I have been grateful to have a great mentor in Amy Price [president at BGO and fellow Women of Influence winner in the DE&I Champion category], who is a working woman and mother of three. Having the visibility of Amy and of other women that have gone through similar experiences is important. Working with people that understand the various needs in anyone's life, man or woman, and allowing people to have their life experience is something that we do really well at this firm because it is part of the culture.

**Sarah Schwarzschild:** Having children was the single biggest change in my life. My children are paramount to everything. As a professional, having children has made me more courageous to do things that I would not have done otherwise in order to set an example for them. When I hear Dara talk about her mentor, I think of how incredibly important representation is. My mom was a Partner at Ropes & Gray, a role she held while raising me, my sister and brother. I took it for granted growing up, but now I realize that I had a role model built into my nuclear family. I have had a lot of other role models as well in my career. It does give you the ability to make those decisions about what is most important, and it gives you access to people to help you navigate through it.

*Representation is clearly important. How does that translate into creating a cohesive environment of support for women and mothers in business?*

**Friedman:** You can always say the right things but executing on them is different. I had the benefit of getting that support quite intimately this year, and it is priceless. Coming out of the pandemic, I had various personal challenges. In particular, my son had a significant illness. Having the support of our entire firm and team and having access to what I needed was incredibly special.



Sarah Schwarzschild

I kept thinking about our culture code and one of its key values – focus on what matters. I did just that, and it allowed me the space to prioritize what I needed to do at home. It made me comfortable to communicate what was going on and ask for time to focus on my family. I had the relationship with my team to explain what was happening without making excuses, and that is really helpful, and then each and every person on our team responded with understanding and was able to continue to execute in the way that we needed to meet our goals. Our culture allowed that balance to be navigated more readily, without a handbook or transition plan in place. This was a real-time and real-life situation.

**Schwarzschild:** I think leading by example is an important part of creating that culture, but it doesn't just pertain to women. It pertains to everyone! I try to be vocal about my life. If I have to go to an event for one of my children, I tell everyone, and I walk out the door and wave good-bye. I hope by doing so I show my team and my colleagues about my life and myself – and also, I hope that I'm helping to make it okay for others to do so as well, whether if it's for a child or another important personal event.



I also think it is important to foster collaboration and connection on your team. During the pandemic, we had to get creative about how we built and maintained those connections virtually. One of my favorite things we did was a photo contest. Every week we would have a different theme, like ‘show me your work-from-home set up.’ Mine was in my closet because it was the only quiet place in my house; another person on the team made a standing desk from a tower of Tupperware boxes. We kept this going for a long time, and people got really creative with it.



Schwarzschild Family

***Tell me more about your leadership style, and how you are effectuating this type of culture?***

**Friedman:** I have always found accountability to be at the center of every decision I make, and that has really resonated for me professionally. I am best when I am accountable, and it is the culture that really drives that spark in me. It is all about who is going to inspire you to get in the trenches. As a leader myself, I am now instilling that accountability in others. To do that, I am open, honest, and fully transparent.

**Schwarzschild:** I believe in leading by example and I believe that culture starts at the top. Leaders at any organization have to be culture carriers. I also think team and professional development is critical for any organization. I spend a lot of time developing the talent on our team.

***How do you pay it forward to the next generation of women who aspire to rise to positions of leadership and influence?***

**Schwarzschild:** We need to do everything that Amy did for Dara and my mom did for me for the people coming behind us. We need to be that representation for younger professionals that are both at our firm and outside of our firm. But representation isn't enough, we need to take it a step further to actively create opportunities for younger women. Many of us mentor more junior professionals. Sponsorship is critical and I challenge us all to be a sponsor to one or more women. And as I mentioned earlier, we also need to normalize and celebrate life and priorities outside of work for all employees, not just women, so no one feels like they need to sneak away for a soccer game or parent teacher conference. At BGO, we are cultivating an environment where women are empowered and championed to experience success both in and out of the office.

***What progress do you hope to see for women in CRE and where do you believe that there is still substantial room for improvement?***

**Friedman:** CRE has the reputation of being a male dominated industry that is slow to evolve. I see this culture shift happening slowly across the board but quickly and efficiently at BGO. I am proud to be a leader at a trailblazing firm in the industry. I like to think that women had a big role in forging a path forward for this type of support, which is now essential for every employee regardless of gender or role at home. It transcends beyond women. People do better when they feel supported.