



CORPORATE TALENT & INCLUSION

Forum: The critical role of managers and allies in the legal profession

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In the corporate world, managers of diverse employees have significant influence over their employees' success and play a major role in retaining and developing those employees

While the same is true in the legal industry, it is harder to determine who is the diverse attorney's manager. Most associates work with a variety of partners, even at smaller law firms, so it is more difficult to say which partner wears the label of "manager." Unfortunately, this often means that it becomes less clear who is responsible for developing, supporting and promoting diverse attorneys.

However, it is the underrepresented – people of color, women, LGBTQ+ persons, individuals with disabilities and veterans – who need effective advocates in the workplace beyond their manager. And these advocates are the courageous allies in society that work to create more equitable and inclusive experiences and workplaces.

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All law firms have their own distinct structure, and this structure determines who is responsible for guiding a diverse associate on their path to success. Obviously, the partner who assigns work should be the first advocate for the attorney's career. Second, practice area leaders (or similar positions) may not interact with diverse attorneys regularly but are responsible for the overall success of all the attorneys under their purview. In some cases, firms also have a person in an administrative role who oversees work assignments, evaluations and feedback – another good candidate to be an advocate. And finally, formal and informal mentors play a role.

In the legal world, all the above-mentioned leaders should act as “manager” in an effort to positively impact diverse associates' career trajectories and enhance the firm's retention. Issues arise, however, when none, or only one, of these people step up and accept the responsibility.

Ensuring that diverse attorneys have access to formalized work assignments, professional development opportunities, mentoring programs and sponsorship commitments does not happen without a concerted effort.

Firm leaders should focus on these four areas to make sure advocacy happens within the firm:

Building relationships

Wesley Bizzell, senior assistant general counsel of Altria Client Services and president of the National LGBT Bar Association, notes that “time is a challenge,” whether in a corporate law department or a law firm, but that “plain old-fashioned listening” is vital to a manager's role in supporting diverse attorneys. Creating relationships with diverse attorneys shows the manager is making an investment in attorney careers.

The key is to create a “sincere relationship with people because it will pay off in the long term,” says Ronald Jordan, senior principal director at Carter-White & Shaw. “It is an investment.”

Providing opportunities

It is critical for diverse attorney success that managers be conscious of how and to whom they assign work and the quality of those assignments. “It's important to be thoughtful about high-profile work across the team,” explains Bonnie Lau, partner at Morrison & Foerster and alumni chair of the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity. “It is common knowledge that partners tend to rely on their choice colleagues, which often excludes underrepresented diverse attorneys.”

Ensuring a pipeline of work

Developing key legal competencies is vital for all attorneys, and work assignments are the primary mechanism in how attorneys gain that skill and knowledge. No matter who controls the pipeline, “just getting diverse attorneys noticed and valued so that they gain access is what is important,” says Gregory Grossman, partner at Sequor Law.

Managers, however defined in a law firm, need to ensure their diverse attorneys get the experience necessary to stay on track at their firms, and there are many ways managers can do this. For example, to ensure the firm's work was equitably distributed, Jenner & Block piloted a new work assignment process to create "more oversight and insight starting with the new associates," notes Courtney Carter, Jenner & Block's director of diversity and inclusion.

Promoting allyship

An ally is an individual who helps to create work cultures that attract and retain the highest quality attorneys. These allies commit to diversity, equity and inclusion in meaningful and lasting ways to best support the advancement of underrepresented attorneys. An ally also must demonstrate courage and agree to risk their political capital for underrepresented attorneys.

This includes "offering to introduce colleagues from underrepresented groups to influential people within your network," says Keyonn Pope, partner at Reed Smith.

Being an ally

What does it mean to be an ally within a legal organization? Senior attorneys who hold positions of influence often act as allies to those with less access, taking responsibility for implementing changes that will enable underrepresented attorneys' success.

"Being an ally, or accomplice, requires a commitment to use one's personal and professional platform to create positive change," says Daniel L. (D.L.) Morriss, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) partner at Hinshaw & Culbertson. Indeed, an ally can perform powerful acts such as recommending newer colleagues for high-profile work, stretch assignments and learning opportunities.

Allies can also demonstrate support by creating a safe space for attorneys to be their authentic selves, normalizing mental health and wellness issues, and suggesting diverse attorneys to be speakers or panelists. "There are people who support DEI and want to be allies," explains Taylor Wilson, managing partner of Haynes and Boone, adding it's important to "empower them to use their voices and privilege to better advocate for change."

Allies also seek to create systemic change within the organization, not just remove barriers for specific underrepresented attorneys. This can be done through resource funding, salary review, inclusive hiring practices, inclusive employee benefit plans, nursing rooms, wellness rooms, prayer rooms, venue accessibility and all-gender restrooms.

Ultimately, allies must give honest and constructive feedback and overcome fears that the receiver will not accept the feedback. Studies have found that African American lawyers receive extra scrutiny from supervising attorneys, which can lead to poor performance reviews, lower bonuses, less visible assignments and job loss. The feedback should be specific. When pinpointing something negative, offer assistance and highlight ways and resources to improve. The key is to tie all feedback to business goals.

In the legal field, diversity of thought and perspective are critical to servicing clients at the highest level. Managers and allies will help law firms move the needle forward in creating an environment in which all underrepresented communities are afforded equal access to quality work and opportunities.

Remember, the ultimate goal of a diverse workforce is to promote a stronger cross section of perspectives, experiences and insights to solve clients' legal challenges. This should be the goal of every attorney and law firm leader.

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