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MARKETING THE LAW FIRM

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Professional Development: How to Be An Ally In the Legal Profession

By Sharon Meit Abrahams

Last year law firms sent out announcements about their commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts in response to racial tensions. Approximately 50% of respondents in a recent survey conducted by Legal Talent Advisors, LLC reported their firms' commitment to DEI stayed the same, while 42.5% reported more effort was made in 2020. One of the initiatives firms stated they implemented is a formal allyship program. However, allyship is not a program or a mindset. It is a verb.

What Is Allyship

Allyship is when a person takes concrete steps that positively impact underrepresented individuals; racially and ethnically diverse, differently abled, women and LGBTQ+ attorneys in the work environment. "Just as start-up companies need capital to build and grow, underrepresented groups need access to political capital to effect real change in an organization," explains Joy Heath Rush, CEO, ILTA (International Legal Technology Association). Like in business, allyship should be used in a strategic fashion to achieve improvements in firm policies and practices — the written ones and the unwritten ones. All firm leaders should be allies, as well as anyone in a firm who can use their influence to initiate change.

Why It Is Important

The legal field is one of the hardest professions to be in, not just for the lawyers, but for the professionals on the business side. Lisa Linsky, McDermott, Will & Emery's first Partner-in-Charge of Firm-wide Diversity & Inclusion notes: "Having allies in the workplace means there are people who believe in you, support your professional growth, and take a stand for inclusion." Allies actively support the efforts of underrepresented/marginalized groups to affect change in their firms. Linsky says the key is *active* support, not those who *go along* with supporting diverse attorneys.

How to Be An Ally

Learning

Before anyone acts as an ally, they need to be introspective to determine their unconscious biases and then “take action to disrupt those biases,” comments Sylvia James, Chief Diversity & Inclusion Officer at Winston & Strawn LLP. Authentic allies, sometimes referred to as collaborators or accomplices, embrace fighting injustice and promoting equity in their workplace as a matter of routine.

A key to being an ally is to learn more about the issues facing diverse colleagues. There are a number of non-fiction books that highlight personal experiences, such as books that explore not having the courage or confidence to be “your true self” at work. Fictional novels written by authors from diverse backgrounds can give a glimpse into different life experiences as well as give the reader better understanding of diverse cultures. There are many articles, podcasts and documentaries available that give light to the struggles of the underrepresented.

Another learning path is to engage in dialogue by asking individuals about obstacles and experiences they have faced at work. Many of the stories will be disheartening but listen intently while trying not to make assumptions. It can be difficult to appreciate another’s perspective when there is no reference point.

Action

The learning will never stop but action should begin immediately. There are two areas that can be confronted: management and individual. On the management front, a law firm leader ally would “help with discussions with [firm] management,” comments Jack Lord, Partner and Co-chair of Foley & Lardner’s LGBTQA Affinity group. Linsky adds, “ensuring firm management is culturally competent in how it messages inclusion, equality and equity to the entire organization,” is critical on the management side. On the individual front, allies can use their clout to ensure quality and challenging work is equitably distributed, business development opportunities are offered, and introductions to clients, powerful people, and influencers are received. Bill Nolan of Barnes & Thornburg describes allyship as, “person-to-person hand-to-hand combat connecting with people and just working with them on a dedicated and consistent basis.”

James explains, “that the most important role an ally has is to speak up and use their voice to amplify the voices of those who might be marginalized.” A true ally uses their privilege, power and connections to teach and influence others. Allies examine the work environment for racist and sexist comments and behaviors that are exhibited consciously and unconsciously then they call it out.

Ally Challenges

Being an ally is hard work. There are social injustices happening in the workplace on a constant basis, so more allies are needed. Stephen Smith of Out Leadership explains: “A common fear that can keep potential allies from becoming active allies is the fear of becoming the target of abuse by standing up for others.” Nolan says, “allies may be concerned that their colleagues (inside or outside their organization) will not support them.”

Fear of saying the wrong thing, in the wrong way with the wrong words trips up allies and potential allies. Well known diversity consultant and now VP, Inclusion Strategy at Netflix, Verna Myers, wrote “*What if I say the Wrong Thing*” to address this fear (see, <https://amzn.to/3v9ysLK>). David Sanders, partner at Foley & Lardner LLP shared that friends and colleagues, “took me to task early on, knowing my heart was in the right place, even when my word choice was still evolving”.

Pushing for change in a law firm is like seeing a stone roll on its own. Something has to initiate the movement. To be an effective ally, anyone in a firm, especially the leaders need to take the first step.

Dr. Sharon Meit Abrahams, a member of *Marketing the Law Firm's* Board of Editors, is a legal talent expert who is helping clients pivot their business develop focus to virtual seminars in 2021. For over 25 years Dr. Abrahams has designed and facilitated business development workshops. She can be reached at sharon@legaltalentadvisors.com.

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