

THE NEED FOR DIVERSITY CHAMPIONS AND SPONSORSHIP PROGRAMS IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

BY SHANE JASMINE YOUNG, ESQ.

Most of us are familiar with the notion of mentors. Typically, a mentor is someone who provides advice, support and counsel. However, for those of diverse backgrounds seeking to progress into leadership positions the need for a more involved mentor is heightened. This is where the theory behind “diversity champions” emerges.

“Champions” or “sponsors” often play a critical role in a minority attorney’s professional development and career advancement. A diversity champion serves as an ally with influence to precipitate desired change, and the inclusion of those historically left to find their own way. Champions transcend the traditional role of a mentor, advocating for the success of members of minority and affinity groups. They help members of these groups gain access to career-making opportunities and work to shift the power dynamics of privilege within a firm or organization. Some law firms are working to integrate more diversity into their legal teams by launching sponsorship programs designed to eliminate bias in the legal profession and create conditions under which female and minority lawyers have an improved chance of reaching the highest professional levels.¹ These programs are essential to diversity strategies and women’s initiatives.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: The Advantages of Offering Sponsorship Programs

It is no secret that law firms across the country have difficulty retaining and advancing female and minority attorneys. The statistics are astonishing, yet understandable. There are a number of reasons behind the high attrition rates for these groups. For example, gender stereotypes may subconsciously, but adversely, affect a woman’s evaluation; others may expect her to be overly pleasant and judge her for being too aggressive or assertive. A recent study indicates that other issues include a lack of mentoring, exclusion from social activities, unequal compensation and a failure to promote



to partnership.² It should come as no surprise, then, that many minority and female attorneys still feel a sense of isolation.

There are a number of advantages in offering sponsorship programs. It helps attorneys who are minorities get ahead. Sponsorship accelerates key experiences and identifies talented individuals who may otherwise be overlooked or even ignored. Diversity champions can shine the spotlight on their protégés. The protégé then feels that both the champion and the organization are making an investment in his or her career and is more secure and happy being part of the organization. Once the protégé is invested, the odds that he or she will leave decrease. For the organization, sponsorship programs increase attorney engagement and retention, reducing losses associated with departures from the firm.

The Firm's Role in Sponsorship

Champions improve an organization's ability to cultivate diversity and foster inclusion. Although the idea of sponsorship is not new, efforts to formalize it have recently gained favor. Formal sponsorship programs are key. As part of its program, the organization should devise, implement and maintain a strategy for change. Going through the motions is not enough. While publishing statistics about minority and female lawyers and power disparities in the legal profession can provide perspective, it does not, in itself, change the numbers. To create significant change, firms must move away from coercion techniques that involve rewarding compliance and punishing non-compliance. A change strategy is more likely to succeed when the organization encourages champions to participate and provides the resources necessary to effect change.

A law firm interested in retaining and promoting diverse candidates must also create an environment with an emphasis on developing talent and providing minority and female attorneys with access to the firm's top leaders.³ Building the right relationships is critical. The firm should connect these attorneys with rainmakers, partners and other organization leaders. Leaders can provide unparalleled guidance and have first-hand experience in dealing with the firm's biggest clients and in generating new business with prospective clients.

The organization should also afford full and equal access to quality work for lawyers of all genders and ethnic backgrounds. This is not automatic when it comes to women and minorities, who are often unaware of various resources and opportunities until someone informs them of their existence. The attorney should be considered, and treated as, a valued member of the organization and encouraged to contribute. An inclusive firm culture that strives to eradicate gender bias, discrimination, disparate treatment and the like is also important.

The Champion's Role in Sponsorship

Critical to any sponsorship program are the champions who serve as behind-the-scenes supporters. Champions should look beyond the usual "rising stars" when it comes time to choose protégés. A champion should constantly seek out diverse candidates and then advocate for them. Some

employees, particularly females, often get penalized for self-advocacy and learn to leave it up to others to recognize their contributions and potential. That is why it is vital to have someone to speak up for them, ensuring that they are not overlooked.

Champions have the clout to have an impact on the success of their protégés by campaigning for them in partner and executive committee meetings, introducing them to well-connected people and pulling them into big projects. These attorneys will benefit from having realizable but challenging work assignments, access to networking and a champion who is willing to vouch for them. Taking a protégé to client meetings and teaching them how to market themselves and develop business are equally important steps. The champion should be able to use his or her influence to overcome bias and resistance to advancing diverse candidates into positions of power.

Offering formal sponsorship programs in law firms to help advance diversity among attorneys is a crucial step in promoting top performers. Such programs can help minorities and women overcome barriers that have traditionally blocked their paths. Sponsorships also provide benefits to the protégé, champion and organization in the quest to achieve diversity. Change will not come overnight, but with planning, fortitude and initiative, there is hope that misconceptions in the legal profession can be dispelled and that a foundation can be built for lawyers of diverse backgrounds to ascend to the upper ranks. ■



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1 Susan Letterman White, JD, MS. *Allies, Influence, Power, and Politics in the Office* (2012).

2 Women Lawyers of Utah. *The Utah Report: The Initiative on the Advancement and Retention of Women in Law Firms* (October 2010). Available at http://utahwomenlawyers.org/wp-content/uploads/WLU_Report_Final.pdf.

3 Nancy Hatch Woodward. Employment Alert: *Sponsorships Make the Difference, Especially for Women* (January 26, 2012).