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INSIGHT: Five Things Clients Can Do to Support the Careers of Diverse Law Partners

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In the recent past, more of corporate America has been focused on ensuring that diverse law firm partners are provided with opportunities to, and are recognized for, providing outstanding client service. Russell M. Franklin, partner at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP, provides guidance on how clients might advance this goal.

In light of recent events that have highlighted the country's racial divide, many organizations have considered what they can do to advance the careers of the outstanding diverse law firm partners they work with and, in some instances, they have asked diverse law firm partners the question directly.

Law firms have their own work to do in advancing the goals of inclusion and equity within their own organizations.

That said, although every case is different, at a very high level there are at least five things that clients can do if they want to support diverse law firm partners.

Try Not to Assume You Know What Matters Will Be Attractive and/or Profitable for the Diverse Partner

Even where there is confidence that several law firms can produce a similar result, clients often bring opportunities of certain types to certain law firms based, in part, on which firms they believe can complete the matter within the organization's budget.

If there is a particular diverse partner that you are looking to support—assuming you trust that they will be honest with you about what can or cannot be done—it helps if you bring every appropriate opportunity to them, including instances where you suspect they may not be able to make the economics work.

Even if the firm isn't the best fit half the time, the other half may represent matters they would not have had otherwise.

Moreover, calling the diverse lawyer that you want to support regarding every appropriate opportunity provides the firm with concrete evidence of the deep relationship between you and the diverse partner in question. This has independent value, as law firms know full well that no one hits a home run each time at bat, but there is an expectation that every partner is creating opportunities to swing.

Be Aware of How the Law Firm Views Responsibility for Client Matters

Every law firm has its own way of tracking new matters and evaluating client relationships. Being recognized as a business generator can play a meaningful role in determining success within the firm.

If you are steering work to a diverse partner because you want to support them, be sure that firm leadership knows you are doing so. That is the best way to ensure that there is no question about where the work is coming from and why.

Ensure That Internal and External Leadership Knows Which Lawyers You Consider Vital to the Client Relationship

Because organizations, law firms, and the relationships between the two are all fluid, information disconnects happen on occasion. If a diverse partner has become vital to the overall client relationship, make an effort to note that early and often within your organization and to the management of the law firm in question as, in many cases, they might not know otherwise.

Raising the profile of outstanding diverse law firm attorneys within your organization may make it easier to provide subsequent opportunities to such attorneys. Within a law firm, being vital to an important client relationship can meaningfully change the career trajectory of a law firm partner.

Ensuring that diverse partners are recognized for their contributions costs nothing, but doing so can have a material impact on their career advancement.

Create a System That Provides Consistent, Meaningful, and Sustained Support to the Diverse Law Firm Partners That You Want to Help

The events that led corporate America to rethink its commitment to diversity and inclusion eventually will pass and something else will consume the American consciousness. However, a diverse partner's need for meaningful client support will be a constant regardless of current events.

The most important, and also most difficult, part of all of this for organizations will be creating an internal machinery that produces consistent, meaningful, and sustained support for diverse talent even as everything outside of the system is constantly changing.

Periodically Ask If There Is Anything Else You Can Do

Although the concept is simple, in my experience, this question is asked much less often than it probably should be. Asking the question is extremely powerful.

First, it requires a diverse law firm partner to think about their career development and where assistance may be helpful.

Second, having the conversation directly allows for a better understanding of the systems in which the diverse law firm partner and in-house lawyer (or other stakeholder) operate.

Law firms and corporate organizations are organic and nuanced. Discussing how these organizations actually operate allows everyone involved to be better informed and more intentional and efficient when it comes to effecting substantive change.

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