

Common Challenges To Diversity Professionals – A Roundtable

The Editor invited the following spokespersons on behalf of diversity to provide their organization's view in regard to our questions: **Ellen F. Rosenblum**, Chair, American Bar Association Presidential Initiative – Commission on Diversity; **Lauren Tapper**, Director of Diversity at Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel LLP; and **Frances Gauthier**, Of Counsel and Chair of the Stradley Ronon Diversity Group and Co-Chair of the Spain and Latin America Practice Group.

Editor: Are there common challenges that diversity professionals face today?

Rosenblum: Any organization that employs a diversity professional among its staff has crossed the first barrier – recognizing that the world in which it operates increasingly expects that diversity is a goal. But hiring a diversity professional does not always signify a commitment to infusing the goal with the resources necessary to achieve it, and that may be the most common challenge of all.

Clearly there are common challenges to diversity – and the American Bar Association still is grappling with most of them. When we launched our diversity efforts some 20 years ago, we thought in terms of race, ethnicity and

gender, and created two commissions to address the professional advancement challenges to minorities and women.

We've since matured into recognizing the range of individuals whose defining characteristics earn them a track on the diversity agenda, including lawyers with varying sexual orientation and those with disabilities, and our growth reinforced what had become evident early on. The groups seeking acceptance and advancement may be defined by different stereotypes, but the barriers are often the same – and the solutions, even if they only solve problems incrementally, can work together.

Common challenges – bias, stereotyping, institutional inertia, cultural differences, linguistic disconnects, competition for resources and opportunities, comfort zones of the familiar and inhibitions against stepping out of them – all of these are challenges for diversity professionals working to mold any environment.

Good intentions are a start toward answers, but only a start. Specifics include incentivizing reform, providing education, creating opportunities to make the unfamiliar feel comfortable, making progress a performance issue, and exploring the details of difference to build understanding.

For example, for many lawyers, "rainmaker" is a term of respect. It signals stature in law firm hierarchy, the leader who "brings in the bucks." But to some lawyers it signifies a stereotype of dancing to a drum, a lack of respect for the cultural traditions of Native Americans who exist as separate nations that enrich our society.

We have a lot to learn together!

Gauthier: Two of the common challenges that diversity professionals face are recruitment and retention of diverse attorneys. These are particularly challenging in today's economy. Although many firms had been successful in attracting and recruiting diverse attorneys in the four or five years leading up to the recession, overall recruitment efforts at many firms has been cut back in the last two years. Furthermore, as work flow has slowed down, firm management has had to become more proactive to ensure that all of their attorneys, including diverse attorneys, continue to feel productive and engaged.

Tapper: In today's world one of the challenges that many diversity professionals face is the impact of the economic environment on diversity. This can manifest itself in several different ways including reduced financial commitment to diversity initiatives/programming, reductions in the number of employees at a particular firm as a result of downsizing, which can impact diversity and implementing effective programs for retention and development for those that remain at the firm. For these issues, there aren't easy answers but a few options and alternatives. It is possible to keep up momentum for diversity programs with fewer financial resources by just being creative. Ensuring head count reductions do not adversely impact diversity gains in the workforce could be difficult if firms had to elimi-

nate entire departments or functions. For some firms with more leeway, having a process to identify critical roles and also reviewing employee performance with the lowest performers leaving the firm first while also keeping a "cross-check" to ensure that more minorities are not being adversely impacted can help address the issue. The most challenging is ensuring those that remain at the firm continue to thrive and develop in an environment where morale, job security and loyalty are in turmoil. Keeping connected to the employees and communicating as often and as much as possible, even if there are no answers, can be helpful.

Editor: Since talented minority personnel are in great demand, what measures do you use to retain personnel?

Gauthier: Stradley Ronon values the backgrounds, experiences and talents that its diverse attorneys bring to the firm and to our community. Consistent with the firm's mission to ensure that all attorneys feel productive and engaged, the firm has been very supportive of three major initiatives lead by diverse attorneys within the past two years. The first was a high school debate team project that ran from January through November of 2009, the second was the creation of the firm's Spain and Latin America Practice Group, and the third was the appointment of two of our diverse partners to lead two prominent diverse organizations in Pennsylvania.

Planning for the high school debate team project, a joint project with the Anti-Defamation League, began in the summer of 2008. Members of the Diversity Group decided on the scope of the project, selected local high schools to participate, recruited additional Stradley attorneys and staff, and served as mentors for each of the diverse students who participated in the debates. Stradley Ronon attorney Maria Wing did an excellent job of leading the effort. The project was an enriching experience for both the mentors and the students, who participated in three major debates in 2009.

Similarly, in the summer of 2009 the Hispanic members of our Diversity Group, Gabriela Arce de Smith, Nicolas Lombo, Carolina Cabrera and myself, decided to launch a Spain and Latin America Practice Group. The group met with the managing partner and chairman of the firm, who quickly approved the plan and offered suggestions for building on the firm's current relationships within the Hispanic-American community. Carolina Cabrera and I co-chair the group. After recruiting additional members of the firm to join, we are excited about the work we are doing and will continue to do in our community.

Finally, the firm is very supportive of the time, commitment and dedication that Deborah Hong and Danielle Banks have each been devoting in their positions as the newly elected President of the Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Pennsylvania and the newly elected Co-President of the Philadelphia Diversity Law Group, respectively.



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Stradley Ronon congratulates Partners Danielle Banks and Deborah Hong



Stradley Ronon partner Danielle Banks was elected Co-President of the Philadelphia Diversity Law Group – an organization dedicated to the recruitment and retention of diverse lawyers by law firms and corporations.



Stradley Ronon partner Deborah Hong was appointed as President of the Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Pennsylvania – an organization dedicated to the advancement of Asian American attorneys.

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