

Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Reed Smith's Deborah Broyles

Law360, New York (November 06, 2014, 4:45 PM ET) --

Deborah Broyles is a partner in Reed Smith LLP's labor and employment group in the firm's San Francisco office. She represents employers in all aspects of employment litigation in the areas of discrimination, sexual harassment, wrongful termination, breach of contract, wage and hour issues, and other related claims in federal and state courts and before administrative agencies.

Broyles has experience coordinating and managing substantial employment litigation dockets for national clients. She also conducts independent internal workplace investigations involving front line employees to C-Suite executives. She counsels clients concerning alternative dispute resolution procedures, personnel policies and practices, and she provides in-house training and seminars on a variety of labor and employment issues. In addition, Broyles advises on diversity best practices, initiatives and training. She sits on the board of directors of San Francisco-based nonprofit Positive Resource Center and on the advisory board of HealthRight 360.



Deborah Broyles

As a participant in Law360's Minority Powerbrokers Q&A series, Broyles shared her perspective on five questions:

Q: How did you break the glass ceiling in the legal industry?

A: The first (and most important) thing I did that helped me to advance to partner in a law firm was to make an affirmative decision that I really wanted to be a partner in a law firm. While this may sound basic, a lot of diverse attorneys wind up staying at firms simply because they think they are supposed to or that they have no other choice. Partnership is not for everyone — and that's okay — so it is important to be thoughtful in evaluating your options and what you want to do with your career. I took a hard look at what it meant to be partner — candidly, the good and the bad — and I decided that it was something that I wanted to achieve.

Having made that decision, I then identified mentors and sponsors who could help me get there. I thought of mentors as those individuals who could provide useful advice and serve as a sounding board as I navigated my career. Sponsors, on the other hand, are individuals in and outside of the firm who

could help me showcase my talent by assisting me with getting the right type of work, making the right client connections, and developing business. I was fortunate to cultivate relationships with several fantastic sponsors throughout my career who really took a meaningful interest in helping me to develop. In return, I did everything I could to deliver consistently good work and to deliver added value, ultimately making them feel that I was invaluable to them and that I was already comporting myself as a partner in the business with them even before the actual partnership decision had been made. In fact, I have practiced with my main sponsor who took me under her wing when I was a junior lawyer for almost two decades and to this day she continues to look out for me and serve this important role.

Q: What are the challenges of being a lawyer of color at a senior level?

A: Senior level attorneys of color who are interested in helping to diversify the legal profession often spend a great deal of time mentoring and developing diverse associates (both in and outside of their organization) to help fill the pipeline. To be sure, this is a labor of love and it is done out of personal interest and commitment to this issue, but the challenge is that to do it right takes a good amount of time that then cannot be spent on billable work. Having said that, I think most senior attorneys of color you ask, myself included, will say that they find the mentoring of junior attorneys of color an imperative and extremely fulfilling.

Q: Describe a time you encountered discrimination in your career and tell us how you handled it.

A: I am certain almost every attorney of color has a story about being mistaken for a staff person or a court reporter when encountering colleagues in the profession for the first time. The story that stands out most prominently for me is an encounter I had with a former partner of mine when I was at another firm. I was visiting one of our offices because I had a court hearing nearby. As I walked by the office of one of my partners, he waived me in and handed me an envelope and asked me to mail it for him. At first I thought he was joking, but then I realized that despite the fact that I was standing there before him in my very best court suit, and I had met him before, he genuinely thought I was a member of the office services staff. Rather than show anger, I responded lightly that I didn't know where the mail room was in that particular office and that I was on my way to court but would try to find someone who could assist him. He apologized and said he thought I was a new staff member, and then he re-introduced himself to me as though he had not met me before on several occasions.

I realize this may not seem like a significant incident to most people, but it certainly has stayed with me over the years. I think it has had such an impact on me because I have no doubt that my former partner did not knowingly mean to disrespect me in this way. But this interaction serves to remind me that there is an implicit bias that people may have when they see the color of my skin and, in this instance, perhaps my gender as well.

Q: What advice would you give to a lawyer of color?

A: First and foremost, to be successful it is a given that the attorney has to have established strong legal skills and a solid knowledge base. I believe that equally important for lawyers of color, especially junior lawyers, is to establish a robust support network. Some people refer to it as having a personal board of directors or group of stakeholders, but the concept is that you have access to a group of mentors who are committed to being your trusted advisors as you are developing throughout your career. I think it is important that the mentors you select are diverse in as many ways as possible. That is, while it is natural to tend to gravitate only to those people who look and think like you do, you should also make an effort to seek out individuals you would consider to be different from you in order to get well-rounded, diverse

feedback. Indeed, I have found that my white male mentors have provided me with feedback or assistance that has been invaluable and that I would not have necessarily received from any other source. Building a network of people you trust and respect does not happen overnight, so it is important that you keep this in mind and nurture meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships over time throughout your career.

Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase diversity in its partner ranks?

A: There are a few key things that law firms can do to assist with recruiting, promoting and retaining diversity in the partner ranks. With respect to recruiting, firms should cast a wide net and expand their recruiting efforts to schools, job fairs, etc. that will give them a more diverse slate of candidates. In so doing, firms have to accept that because someone may not be coming from a top 10 ranked law school that it is somehow sacrificing quality or that the candidates are lacking in merit. That is not the case at all. Additionally, being active on law school campuses through the minority student organizations is a great way to get the firm's name recognized as one being interested in diversity.

Probably the biggest challenge firms have is retaining diverse attorneys. Unfortunately, there's no easy fix, but there are some basic, commonsense steps firms can take in an effort to retain diverse talent who will want to stay with the firm and join the partnership ranks. Among them are a commitment to investing the resources and time in training and developing the diverse attorneys, developing a mentorship program that ensures diverse attorneys are getting the same meaningful work and opportunities for exposure and advancement in the firm and with clients that white attorneys are getting, make sure there is an unbiased evaluation process in place that fairly gauges the associate's development with that of his or her majority peers and openly discuss partnership aspirations with the diverse attorneys and detail what they need to do to achieve partnership status, and encourage them to progress toward that goal.

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the firm, its clients, or Portfolio Media Inc., or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.
