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# Diversity

## A Perspective For Positioning Law Firms and Individuals for Success

**G**iven her unique perspective, we interviewed April Miller Boise regarding her thoughts about hiring, maintaining, and promoting a diverse team. She also talked about what minorities and women should do to develop their own careers. April is the General Counsel at Veyance Technologies, Inc., a global organization based in Fairlawn, Ohio. Prior to taking the helm at Veyance's Legal Department, April was the managing partner of Thompson Hine's Cleveland office. April believes that diversity is about more than just doing the right thing. She advocates that when there are diverse voices at the table, problems are solved more effectively and creatively.

For April, to be diverse, an organization has to do more than simply employ minorities and women. Diversity should not just encompass visible characteristics, but must also take into account the broader and sometimes less obvious dimensions such as social and economic background, work styles, generational experiences, ethnic backgrounds, thinking styles, sexual orientation, religion or veteran or disability status. In order to be innovative and to compete in today's economy, law firms need to understand that an individual standing alone is not diverse – he/she is only diverse when viewed against an otherwise homogenous group.

April pointed out something that isn't often considered. She said that an organization can appear diverse because they employ minorities and women when in fact little true diversity is present. Specifically, many of the allegedly "diverse" partners in large law firms actually have backgrounds and educations similar to those of the Caucasian majority attorneys. The true goal, says April, is to achieve "diversity of thought." Unless attorneys come from different geographic, cultural, educational and economic backgrounds

and/or have different communication and work styles, the diversity of thought is not as rich as it needs to be.

According to April, law firm culture would best be served by moving from the more narrow definition of diversity and incorporating successful initiatives to recruit, build and retain a diverse workforce on all fronts. In her opinion, the most difficult challenge is to retain candidates from diverse backgrounds that will stay long enough to build a truly diverse organization. To retain a diverse workforce, the key is to create environments of inclusion where all employees are accepted, respected and utilized for their differences, and believe they have an opportunity to succeed based on their merits.

Drawing from her personal experiences, April believes that having personal relationships with informal mentors are a significant factor in whether minorities and women will excel at a firm. A well thought out and implemented program to help racial minorities, women and all new lawyers get acclimated to a firm and its culture is the lynchpin to a firm's success in building, promoting and retaining a diverse workforce for the next generation. As April said, "making the firm culture one that promotes and rewards lifting and supporting lawyers from all backgrounds" is at the heart of successful diversity initiatives.

Biases and stereotypes still have an impact on the work environment in ways that result in minorities and women leaving firms in greater numbers than their white male counterparts. Specifically, women and minorities often do not get the "prime" assignments initially and/or do not receive honest critical feedback or recognition regarding their work. As a result, they may have little opportunity to improve and develop their skill sets. These conditions may lead them

to feel disconnected and ill equipped to face the challenges presented in a law firm environment. Effective mentoring and coaching can help address these issues. Mentoring has the power to help minorities and women feel valued and part of the firm culture, opines April.

In order to be successful, mentoring must be a continuous process that nurtures, empowers and motivates. Everyone needs a mentor who takes the extra step of also being a champion who can promote them inside or outside of the firm. In reflecting on her own experiences, April says that she was fortunate to have many champions during her career. She says it is important for minorities and women to make an effort to develop relationships with people within an organization who are in a position not only to evaluate their work and provide constructive feedback, but who can also help understand and navigate an organization's politics.

April was fortunate enough to find champions that afforded her client development and relationship opportunities. She says that allowing lawyers to be visible to clients is required in order to prepare them to be relationship partners. Everyone knows that client relation-

ships drive firm revenue which in turn controls compensation and power within a law firm. When minorities and women drive and manage more client relationships, they will stay and thereby assist the firm in reaching critical mass with respect to true diversity.

In terms of what minorities and women can do, April encourages participation in lawyer affinity or diversity groups outside the firm. These groups allow all people to broaden their network of professional contacts, support the experiences and endeavors of others like them and, hopefully, see success in action.

April also recommends taking charge of your own destiny. Be proactive. Be courageous. Commit to changing the existing firm culture. Be comfortable in your own skin and empower others to do the same. Take personal responsibility to effectuate change.

The most successful people impact their environment, says April. Before you can impact your environment, you must first understand and adjust to it. You must succeed in the environment and then move forward to change and impact it. April recommends that all new lawyers develop relationships with more senior layers at their firm by finding some

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common ground (art, authors, soccer, travel, etc.). Just because a person is from a different background, do not assume that you have nothing in common. A true visionary breaks down barriers by helping others safely address their own biases. But until you find common ground, the likelihood of breaking down biases is slim to none.

Finally, April says if you can, stay at a firm that needs a change in culture and be a leader. Stay and help the firm reach the critical mass of diversity necessary to change the culture for the long term.

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