

Why Aren't There More Minority Partners?



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First, I want to be candid—I am currently being considered for partnership this year in my law firm. Last year, my wife, Karen Turner McWilliams, was elected to the partnership of Verner Liipfert Bernhard McPherson & Hand. Both of us are minorities. However, don't let my examples mislead you.

More than 10 years ago, top-ranked law schools admitted classes more diverse than ever. Since then, more than 20 percent of the students at some elite schools have been members of minority groups, and the percentages at other law schools have exceeded 10 percent. Many of those graduates spent summers working as interns at big firms and went on to become lawyers there. By 1993, at least eight percent of starting associates belonged to minority groups. It takes about eight years to become a partner at most firms. So some partners hoped that by now these increasingly diverse classes of young lawyers would have become a diverse class of young partners. That has not happened. To find out why there aren't more minority partners, several committees on diversity in the profession from affiliate bar associations interviewed minority associates at large law firms. Almost all of the associates interviewed perceived the same obstacles in obtaining the Holy Grail of partnership.

Lack of High-Quality Assignments

Firms groom associates on the partnership track by giving them progressively more challenging assignments on important cases. According to the minority associates interviewed, they are usually given unchallenging, low-profile assignments and are relegated to the backwater of undesirable cases. As a result, minority associates are not able to prove that they can handle greater responsibilities because they do not have an opportunity to show that they can meet the demands.

Lack of Mentoring/Coaching

Another widely shared belief is that, in order to make partner, it is critical to have at least one politically powerful mentor (i.e., a partner) in one's corner. The minority associates uniformly said that non-minority partners tended to select non-minority associates to mentor. Moreover, because there are so few minority partners in most firms (in some cases, none), minority associates could not realistically expect to be mentored by minority partners.

Dearth of Rainmaking Opportunities

The key to making partner, in the view of most of the associates interviewed, is to develop business and bring new clients to the firm. Minority associates felt handicapped in these areas as well, reporting that they have fewer opportunities to network with

potential clients. One managing partner said that minority lawyers were less likely to have relationships with important clients or to have secured a significant amount of business for the firm.

Prejudice in the Work-Place

Many associates said that their co-workers often harbor stereotypical views of minorities. The associates interviewed felt the need to prove that they “deserve” to be working at their firms. Even where their credentials (e.g., grades, law review, clerkships) were superior to those of their non-minority counterparts, minority associates frequently felt that they were perceived as “inferior” and less capable than non-minority associates.

Many minority associates also felt that minorities were held to a different, higher standard. They felt that partners were more tolerant of mistakes made by non-minority associates, whereas, in contrast, a minority associate would be branded as incompetent if he or she made the same mistakes.

What to Do

I don't know what to do. However, I did call several minority partners (yes, including my wife) in major law firms to ask for advice. These partners who have risen through the ranks offer these suggestions to young lawyers seeking partnership status:

- Do not feel that, as a minority lawyer, you must select a minority partner as a mentor;
- Identify a practice area that is growing, identify a rising partner in that practice area, and then create opportunities to work with that partner;
- Develop expertise in a specific area of the law, and publish and/or lecture in this area;
- Get involved in firm life by attending firm social gatherings and volunteering to help out with firm administration;
- Appear confident and poised to meet any challenge, no matter how difficult;
- Get involved in professional organizations to increase knowledge and network, and
- Prove your potential for generating business. Even if you don't have the contacts necessary to bring in new clients, you can service current clients well and keep them happy.

By the way, I will let you know in November how well these suggestions worked for me. 🙏