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## Law Firms Must Rethink What It Means to Invest in Diverse Talent

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Law firms are struggling mightily with the challenges of retaining and developing their talent—and especially their diverse talent. One major thing law firms can do to meet this challenge is harness and deploy the individual influence and clout of their senior leaders and rainmakers. This group, still mainly white men (along with a slowly but encouragingly increasing cadre of women), received the great gift of sponsorship from prior generations. And yet as we attempt to engage one-on-one with extremely talented junior professionals, we encounter wide gulfs of life experience associated with differences in race, gender, ethnicity, generation and associated views about professional achievement and satisfaction.

Overcoming these barriers starts with a better appreciation of all of the things a senior, successful lawyer actually can do. The intentions are good, but they often atrophy, through a combination of ignorance (“what should I do?”), fear (“what if I say the wrong thing?”), and competition for our attention. It is a less risky path to keep doing what we already do well: “Why take a chance on something where success isn’t assured?” As I have often heard from other senior colleagues: “I want to help, but I am just not good at this.”

There is no one way to be “good at this,” no common success recipe, no universal tool kit for helping someone rise in an organization and a profession. Indeed, I have stumbled about in this area over the years, trying to understand the multiple dimensions of what it means to build a vibrantly diverse organization. But I have also had the privilege and good fortune to see great sponsors at work. They understand the importance of what it means to invest in someone. And they do three things well: Listen, teach and network. Each interacts with the others in a dynamic and continuous way to drive success.

Listening is the most important of these, and hardest to do. As a successful professional, there is an overwhelming temptation to skip this step. You know the recipe for success, because you achieved success using it. You have 20 to 30 years of experience honing your craft, your business, your skills. And you are eager to pass on that wisdom. So let’s get on with it. You are an expert in problem-solving, and this one looks easy because you have already done it.

The only problem is that your success recipe is your success recipe. It is no one else’s. The conditions that created your success no longer exist. The market is different. Your organization is different. The conditions that prevailed during your rise facilitated success because of the way they



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interacted with your unique collection of attributes, relationships, interests, ambitions and passions. And your limitations.

It is, therefore, foundational that this journey begins by listening to the junior lawyers you aim to help. What does “success” even mean to them? What are their hopes, dreams and ambitions? What are their attributes, skills and limitations? How have their experiences and opportunities differed from yours? How has their diversity impacted their trajectory?

This is not a step to simply get through, although it is tempting to do that. “OK, please tell me about you, but then let’s get back to the main event, which is me telling you how to be successful.” That approach virtually assures failure, as the advice will be prepackaged and rote. Instead, we have to push ourselves to listen actively. To be genuinely curious. To test whether our thoughts about how a protégé can succeed change, adapt and refine based on what he or she

has said. Nor is this one-and-done. Listening more and more attentively throughout the investing journey allows you to continually enhance your protégé's success recipe.

Here is a recent example. A star-quality, African American counsel in our firm approached me to ask: "Can you help me think through a career choice that may involve me leaving the firm? I have a very intriguing offer to go in-house and create a hybrid legal/business career that plays to my strengths." It wasn't the kind of question a sponsor typically wants to receive. Our goal is to help the firm improve diversity, equity and inclusion within our ranks, and to reduce attrition of our up-and-coming talent. But if my role is limited to keeping her at our firm, then I am not truly engaging her on her ground, on her definition of success.

As she put it, "I need you to be part of my personal board of directors, not just an advocate for keeping me here." The discussions that ensued required deep and nuanced listening to all the things that make up her success recipe, not mine.

In the end, she decided to leave. And even though that means our firm lost someone valuable, we hopefully have gained something important. We are learning to help lift everyone's boat on their own terms, trusting the best candidates will see that our firm cares holistically about their careers. Perhaps she returns, skills enhanced with amazing experience. And if not, perhaps she will be a potent ambassador for the law firm that was her springboard.

If you have truly listened, then teaching and networking—the other two key components of investing—come more easily. You have much

to give. It is easy to overlook how much you have learned in practicing and honing your craft through your career. Recall those early years, and the anxieties that accompanied the unfamiliar terrain of interacting with clients, the challenges of public speaking and managing others, or the many other dimensions of success. But how best to convey your knowledge and experience?

The best teaching involves serious, focused, constructively critical feedback. Think about what you went through with your best mentors. Back then, feedback was unvarnished and blunt if not brusque, in no-nonsense pursuit of excellence. But those relationships were typically senior white men mentoring junior white men, and their basic shared identity and experiences, and parallel lives, effectively softened the blow. Here, much larger personal and experiential divides loom. You can and must give the same feedback that you received when you were coming up, but with the kind of care that recognizes you are both bridging wider gaps.

And, finally, help your diverse lawyers access your network. Your success is about more than your native skills, your acquired knowledge, and your experiences. It is about who you know: the networks you have been invited into, built over time and interact with in ways that multiply the impact of your talent. This is one of the great deficits you can help others overcome. For junior professionals, particularly women, and even more particularly professionals of color, networking inside professions long and still-dominated by senior white men is beyond daunting; it may be the single greatest contributor to such diverse talent giving up the fight, and

leaving for less skewed professional environments.

Facilitating diverse lawyers' access to your network—meaning, the people you have come to know throughout your career who can help provide opportunities and open doors—thus is vital to their success and advancement. Give them platforms for personal exposure. Take them to your clients. Talk about their accomplishments with others you know. Creating buzz around someone's good work has a multiplier effect.

Part of this journey involves overcoming the fear that we will simply say the wrong thing. The truth is, we might. The language of diversity can be fraught with uncertainty and anxiety. My generation, for example, was taught to be color blind, and it has taken much of my life to realize that is neither possible nor desirable.

But each new engagement with a diverse protégé requires achieving trust and a comfort level with each other about how to even discuss differences, and both the difficulties and the opportunities they create. To do that, you need to risk vulnerability and embrace humility. It is a lot of work. The degree of investing will thus naturally scale with your availability; the talent and enthusiasm of those who seek your help (and who you identify and seek out); and, frankly, whether you come to truly enjoy the engagement and see it as an important part of what you do and should do. After all, someone did it for you.

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