

Q&A

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Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Hunton & Williams' Rudene Haynes

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Rudene Mercer Haynes is a partner in Hunton & Williams LLP's Richmond, Virginia, office. Her practice focuses on corporate finance, primarily structured finance and securitization. She has represented issuers, lenders, servicers and underwriters/placement agents of financial assets, including mortgage-related assets, trade receivables and other payment intangibles.

Haynes is a board member and chairwoman of the governance committee for the William Byrd Community House, an organization whose mission is to transform lives through building self-sufficiency. In 2011, she was named one of the "Most Influential Women in Virginia" by Virginia Lawyers Weekly.

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

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

A: First, I strongly believe in being proactive about your career path and not allowing others to dictate or define your career. In order to be proactive, it's important to not be afraid of asking difficult or uncomfortable questions of your firm and team leadership as they relate to your career's trajectory.

I started at the firm as a summer associate. Over the years, I had many conversations and discussions with my firm's leadership. Asking those questions helped me "break the glass ceiling" and become the first African-American female in Hunton's history to be promoted to the partnership "through the ranks." When I was an associate, I was willing to take on assignments and work with clients that may not have been the most appealing. I specialized in a practice area with a steep learning curve, though I had never even heard of "structured finance" or "securitization" when entering law school. Getting out of your comfort zone, taking on unexpected challenges, and making sure people notice will help boost you up the ladder in this industry. Additionally, being collegial is always an important part of success — that includes

being respectful of everyone within and outside of the practice, from your supervising partner to the security attendant who greets you every morning.

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

A: One of the many challenges I've experienced in being a senior lawyer of color would be having access to the networks with the "decision makers" that could potentially engage you as counsel. Another challenge I believe all lawyers of color likely face (at one point or another) is being 100 percent comfortable with who you are and what you stand for — especially when you don't look like those around you and may have a dissimilar background.

Taking a stand and not allowing yourself to be silent on subjects that matter can be difficult for lawyers of color, simply because we already stand out due to our biological makeup; but it is important to not adopt an "I don't want to rock the boat" mentality — ever. It impacts your credibility and integrity as an individual, let alone as a lawyer, and those are non-negotiable, in my opinion.

Distribution of work can be a challenge for lawyers of color at the senior level. This includes ensuring that assignments and opportunities are fairly distributed among capable associates, ensuring that credit/kudos is properly given for work, and unabashedly lobbying for the recruitment of diverse talent. All of these are matters that are important to me. Folks who know me well can attest that my favorite quote, one which I recite often, is "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

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

A: During the course of my 15-year career, I have had very few experiences in which I have encountered discrimination. However, there has been at least one situation in which an issue was raised by a client regarding my performance during a transaction that seemed unjustified and downright unfair. This situation caused me to question the legitimacy of the criticism and I honestly suspected that discrimination was at play. There was nothing ever explicitly stated to suggest that race was a factor though. To this day, I regret that I did not push harder (even if it would have been uncomfortable to do so) to determine the real reason for the criticism of my performance in this particular transaction. Had I pushed harder, I wouldn't have to doubt whether discrimination was the real culprit. I failed myself in not running this issue to the ground when it happened, and instead just choosing to let it go. I hope that my experience provides a teaching moment for other lawyers of color. If in the course of your career, you perceive that you have experienced discrimination of any sort, you have a responsibility to not only yourself but those that follow behind you to determine whether discrimination is really a factor. The only way we can eliminate the binds of discrimination is to acknowledge that it exists and address it directly.

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

A: I would advise lawyers of color to spend time building relationships instead of passing around business cards at cocktail parties. In my opinion, the best way to do that is to connect on a personal and professional level with the client representatives that receive frequent interaction. As a junior corporate associate, I often worked with analysts and vice presidents at investment banks. As you mature in the practice, they simultaneously climb the corporate ladder, and you end up rising in the industry together. Who could have known that the analyst would become a managing director eight years from when you first met one another?

However, it's more than just doing the daily grind. I'd advise lawyers of color to get out of their offices. Whether its serving in a civic or community leadership role, speaking/moderating on panels, going to industry conferences, or simply visiting clients, it's important to get out there and be noticed. And, sometimes it's on your own dime.

There are many successful lawyers in the industry who bill nonstop. But there are also many lawyers who are equally as successful (and happier) yet have a more balanced life. Find something you are passionate about — that isn't billable — to fuel passions outside of work.

Lastly, cultivate a mentor/sponsor — someone who challenges you but also criticizes you when you've committed missteps. Don't be surprised if they don't have a lot in common with you at first. Having a mentor pays off when they have your back.

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

A: While there are many ways to increase diversity, it's hard to diversify your partner ranks if the firm doesn't truly appreciate diversity from the top down. I would recommend that any law firm take an introspective look to see if diversity is really valued at all levels of the firm, starting at the top. Reward those practice leaders who have made strides in diversifying their teams. Partner with clients who have made diversity a priority. If they're willing, try to collaborate on ways to improve diversity numbers in the partner ranks.

Additionally, press your practice leaders on the issue of diversity. There are thousands of talented minority attorneys out there. Any firm can find diverse talent if they truly want to.

I think it's helpful to nurture your minority associates from the moment they walk in the door, and don't allow them to fall through the cracks. Ensure there are resources in place that will help them to succeed, including mentoring circles/groups and retreats for minority lawyers to share strategies/tips for success. A safe, reliable pipeline for diversifying your partner ranks is to groom diverse talent from within the firm.

Lastly, encourage conversations in all corners and crannies of the firm about matters of diversity and racial, ethnic, gender and sexual orientation bias. We all know it exists, but it cannot be eradicated unless candid conversations are being had about it.