

# Planning for the success of diverse attorneys

## Legal department leaders should provide business training to foster growth opportunities

By Laurie Robinson, May 30, 2012

Last year, Corporate Counsel Women of Color (CCWC) released its seminal study, “The Perspectives of Women of Color Attorneys in Corporate Legal Departments,” which revealed important data about the work experience of female attorneys. The study, designed by the Center for Creative Leadership, measured 14 components, including perceptions about organizational climate for diversity and inclusion, promotional opportunities, as well as future career aspirations, to name a few.

On the component of future career aspirations, the majority of respondents set high goals for themselves. They aimed to become division general counsel or chief legal officers. One-third of respondents said they aspire to head a business unit.

The career aspirations of these diverse, talented attorneys in corporations confronts the unfortunate reality that there is a small number of women of color who serve as CLOs of Fortune 500 companies (read about Project 5-165) and an even smaller number of women of color who serve as CEOs of Fortune 500 corporations. Studies by Catalyst, the American Bar Association and other organizations have shown that the contributing factors to these disproportionate numbers are biases, diminished training and developmental opportunities, and the lack of mentoring relationships and access to senior managers.

The good news about these reports is that they provide recommendations that can help companies address and resolve these barriers to equal opportunity.

If women and diverse lawyers are not provided with equal access and opportunities to develop the critical knowledge and skills necessary to move into management positions, the numbers will remain as they are: low and dismal.

Nonetheless, I remain optimistic that corporations can get diverse attorneys into the pipeline of managerial and executive roles. But it will require focus, succession planning, attention and concerted effort from all parties involved.

American Airlines’ legal department provides a good example of how to give all lawyers equal opportunity to training, development, mentorship and access to senior management. The company offers a one-year rotational assignment program, which provides attorneys the opportunity to work in and gain knowledge in a new area of expertise. In addition, Gary Kennedy, general counsel of American Airlines, encourages cross-section lunches, wherein different practice groups have lunch to encourage morale and collegiality among peers. American Airlines further sponsors high-talent attorneys, including diverse women attorneys, to participate in leadership development programs.

As the U.S. population continues to change and become more diverse, corporations should start today to develop the diverse talent within their ranks. Rotational assignments in new practice areas can help to develop new skills. Moreover, rotational assignments in the corporation’s various business units can increase business acumen.

Teri Plummer McClure (senior vice president of legal, compliance, audit and public affairs, general counsel and secretary, UPS) is a great example of how development of diverse talent and succession planning yields positive results. Prior to her appointment, McClure held several leadership roles within the company, including special assignments in logistics and distribution—where she actually had to touch and feel the boxes.

Leadership knows no boundaries and does not operate in one dimension. The true beneficiary of this type of development can only be the legal departments that step out and fully develop their employees.

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