



# FOR LEGAL EMPLOYERS: **16** WAYS TO EXPEDITE THE ADVANCEMENT OF LAWYERS OF COLOR

Since the launch of *Next Gen Leadership: Advancing Lawyers of Color (NGL:ALC)* initiative in May 2018, the Legal Executive Institute has conducted 23 interviews of attorneys of color across generations, ethnicities, geographic locations, and segments of the industry. During these discussions, attorneys of color shared their insights on how legal employers have helped create opportunities for lawyers of color across the industry.

Out of all of the interviews, most of the actions cited focused on increasing inclusion through positive actions taken by senior white male attorneys who hold a majority of the positions of influence across the industry. The guidance from the interviewees, which includes several *NGL:ALC* advisory board members, also focused on three top themes that reveal what is needed to retain and advance lawyers of color. The three themes included: sponsorship to navigate law firm spaces; access to critical assignments; and an increased understanding on the unique experiences of attorneys of color.



The following 16 actions were mentioned at least *twice* in the interviews of those profiled:

1. **Create a culture of sponsorship** — Jill Louis, partner in the corporate practice at K&L Gates, observes that there are enough people in the industry to create a strong group of “die-hard sponsors.” Traci Bransford; partner at Stinson, LLP; says she fills in the gap in sponsorship for lawyers of color. “My every-day mission is to pull up as many lawyers with me as possible and try to keep those that come behind me here because if they don’t see me here, they won’t stay.”
2. **Make sponsorship formal and intentional with the need for more senior lawyers with influence sponsoring proteges of color** — Nefertiti Alexander, senior associate at Kasowitz Benson Torres, underscores that point, saying that sponsoring women of color requires a deliberate strategy. “Retaining women of color will not happen organically without intentional effort. Because there are not as many women lawyers of color as role models who can more organically take women of color under their wing, there is a need for the connection to occur across genders and race/ethnicity to advance diversity in the profession.”
3. **Allow space for lawyers of color to make mistakes and learn from them in order to avoid permanent damage to their performance** — Sebastian Sanchez, a mid-level associate at White & Case, notes how critical learning from his mistakes has been for his career. Sanchez made mistakes along the way and used them as opportunities for learning by showing that he valued the feedback to improve his work product.
4. **Analyze who you are spending time with** — If it is mostly with people that look like you, then there is an opportunity for improvement. Kasowitz’s Alexander suggests that senior lawyers take a moment for reflection to “ask themselves, ‘Have I ever taken a woman of color under my wing?’ If not, ask ‘why not?’”
5. **Learn about the unique experiences of lawyers of color** — Stinson’s Bransford states that if lawyers of color “come to work in a firm where you feel like you are misunderstood based on your racial differences from the majority, [then that] makes for a very uncomfortable place to work.” To learn about the unique experiences of attorneys of color, start with these questions:
  - a) Do you believe men and women of color have different experiences at our organization?
  - b) Can you describe these differences from your perspective?
  - c) What do you think are the root causes of these differences?
  - d) Have you experienced any barriers to success as a person of color?
  - e) In terms of mentorship and promotion, do you sense that those career events happen without bias?
  - f) What can I do better to facilitate your success and sense of inclusion?

6. **Create a safe and comfortable place to work** — Otherwise, an approximate \$400,000-investment is walking out of the door when an associate leaves, Bransford says, noting that the cost comes in terms of dozens of hours of partners' time, hundreds of hours of professional development through the firm's associate training programs, and limited marketing resources to attract them. Treat others how you want to be treated, she elaborates. "Smile and speak to co-workers no matter what their complexion or status is, including the legal assistants, mail room folks, etc. It is part of human dignity."
7. **Assume positive intent of greatness and trust for lawyers of color** — Trust lawyers of color to do challenging work well. "It was such a blessing when I made mistakes," says Louis, of K&L Gates. "I was given an opportunity to show that I could get it right and to not hold that against me as something that is a permanent state of a lack of trust."
8. **Give actionable, real-time feedback with context often** — Louis adds that "Too often, people assume lawyers of color or first generation lawyers are going to intuit the 'why' when they are working on something. Giving context to people is key." To make it easy to give on-the-spot feedback, she explains to her team that, "Here is what the client is facing... and here is what it means for you as the lawyer."
9. **Make mentorship intentional and formal for lawyers of color** — Gary Zhao, partner at Smith Amundsen, says that "mentoring is more important than salary and bonuses. Having a great mentor shows a younger lawyer that the practice of law is not all about earning a big paycheck, paying off student loans, or securing a comfortable life. It is about producing quality, substantive work that is challenging and keeps you advancing as a lawyer."
10. **Pay for early career lawyers of color to join ethnic bar associations on Day 1** — Zhao, shares his experience from getting involved with the Asian American Bar Association in Chicago 10 years ago, and how this was key to his success as a partner today. To specifically build relationships with other members, he shared his experience with other lawyers and mentored younger attorneys and law students. These bar association connections are "very important, because you have other Asian American attorneys who want to help each other and want to see one another do well," he says.
11. **Prioritize diversity in leadership where lawyers are seen as visible role models** — "It is crucial for young attorneys of color to see examples of themselves in leadership roles from those who have made it," says White & Case's Sanchez. Also, it encourages us to "strive higher and say, 'This person was able to do it — I want to reach that level of sophistication as an attorney.' When you don't see that, it is harder."
12. **Do not underestimate the impact of being one of the few people of color in the workplace on a lawyer's personal well-being** — "It is draining to operate in a profession where you might not always see someone who looks like you," says Bryan Browning, Sr. Legal Counsel, Commercial Litigation, Lenovo.
13. **For firms, take an introspective look at who you are and what you have to offer to lawyers of color if advancement of lawyers of color is truly a top priority** — Browning elaborates on the importance of this kind of firm introspection because the needs for attorneys of color and white attorneys are not uniform. "Most of firms' leadership who are making decisions about firm culture, dynamics, and policies all look the same with similar backgrounds, upbringings, and understandings. They are going to be skewed or tilted to that worldview because there is mostly homogenous individuals in the leadership."
14. **Coach lawyers of color how to navigate large law spaces when matter assignments are handled informally** — Jamala McFadden, co-founder of Employment Law Solutions, an Atlanta-based employment boutique law firm owned exclusively by African-American women, illustrates the challenge for lawyers of color "when getting key assignments is based on informal relationships and oftentimes, lawyers of color are left out of that process." Her co-founder Chandra Davis says that intentional effort is critical to ensure attorneys of color are "getting good quality work that grows their practice." It's also crucial that they be "part of a succession plan where these lawyers get a book of business with the opportunity to grow the book," adds Davis.

15. **Ensure equal access to opportunities for assignments** — Zhao, of Smith Amundsen, knows the importance of this from experience. His firm has ensured he received excellent assignments. “It is really very important for a lawyer like myself to receive challenging assignments,” he says.
16. **Realize that lawyers of color and white lawyers are more alike than they are different** — To illustrate the point, a female partner at a firm in the south stated, “I like football and superhero movies, too.”

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