

WHITE PARTNER, BLACK ASSOCIATE: HOW THEY MADE MENTORING MEANINGFUL

OPINION: PROVIDING HELP TO MINORITY ASSOCIATES CAN'T REST SOLELY WITH THE FEW PARTNERS OF COLOR.

BY TERRY WADE AND BRANDON VAUGHN
FEBRUARY 15, 2016

As we recognize Black History Month in the year 2016, we have no doubt that good intentions on matters of diversity abound at the country's major law firms. Our profession, and our world, are much different than they were in 1938, when two Jewish lawyers founded our law firm, in part because they had been denied opportunity at other firms of their day. The fact that we've moved on from such overt and pervasive discrimination is good news indeed.

The more difficult news is this: For large law firms and the lawyers who work at them, having good intentions on diversity is not enough to ensure progress. Black lawyers account for only 3 percent of all lawyers at the nation's largest firms, and just 1.8 percent of partners, according to The American Lawyer's Diversity Scorecard. Perhaps more troubling than the small numbers themselves is the fact that they are moving in the wrong direction, having fallen off since the onset of the recession.

Anyone who has practiced at a law firm knows that the good intentions of others alone will not make any lawyer — white or black, minority or majority — successful. In order for lawyers to succeed, they must of course perform good work. Beyond that, however, they must receive opportunities and gain advocates.

Whether due to unconscious bias or otherwise, many attorneys of color do not receive opportunities that facilitate their advancement.

Many also lack advocates willing to promote them inside their firms for partnership consideration and outside of their firms to existing and prospective clients.

A VITAL AVENUE

For lawyers lucky enough to receive them, those types of opportunities and advocacy frequently come through mentors. Thus, mentors constitute a vital avenue through which large law firms can increase the retention and advancement of minority attorneys. Importantly, there is no need for those mentor attorneys to be minorities themselves. It is not right — nor, given the stark numbers cited above, realistic — to expect the relatively small number of minority partners to fill the mentor role for all minority associates.

To the contrary, lawyers have much to gain by participating in a mentoring relationship with a lawyer of a different background. We know this firsthand. In fact, the two of us — a white partner and black associate — have achieved a deeper and more meaningful mentor-mentee relationship as a direct result of our diversity.

Here we tell our story from both of our perspectives, in hopes of inspiring others to reach out to a mentor or mentee different from themselves.

Terry Wade: As much as I'd like to take credit for cultivating my relationship with Brandon, it would not have happened without his initiative.

As a summer associate, he stopped by and asked if we could have lunch. I respected his proactive approach, and I hoped to repay him with some wisdom that he could use.

But it occurred to me that while I knew a lot about being a trial lawyer, I knew little to nothing about the experience of a lawyer of color coming to practice in Minnesota. I asked a black defense lawyer I knew to join us for lunch, where he discussed race and the practice of law in Minnesota in clear and candid fashion. I mostly listened, and probably learned more from the lunch than anyone else.

Brandon eventually joined our firm and worked mostly with others. When I needed help with a brief on short notice, Brandon came to mind. He was willing to assist, and he turned in a fine piece of work. Soon he was handling matters for me on a regular basis. When I spot areas for improvement in his work, I offer honest guidance. When his work shines, as it usually does, I'm clear about that, too. No sugarcoating necessary.

Given our introduction, Brandon and I often discuss issues of race in conjunction with the practice of law. It has been a hallmark of our relationship, and one for which I'm grateful, given how much I've learned from his perspective. Mentoring is a reciprocal relationship, and I've gotten more than my share of the bargain.

Brandon Vaughn: I have been fortunate to have some black lawyers serve as mentors to me. But I also knew that I could benefit greatly — and expose myself to new opportunities — by identifying

someone who did not look like me and who was willing to invest in my success. Terry has turned out to be such an advocate, and our relationship started early on when he earned my trust.

He openly acknowledged that we likely had different life experiences and wasn't afraid to address or account for that fact, as when he invited another black lawyer to our initial lunch. His willingness to recognize we had differences and to act as a resource gave me confidence that Terry had my best interests in mind.

Although we did not work together my first two years of practice, eventually an opportunity to make a positive impression on him arose. From that experience, our relationship began to grow. On future assignments he provided constant feedback, both positive and negative. Because of his direct and candid input, I knew he was being transparent with me. Without it, we would not have the relationship of trust and honesty we do today.

I salute Terry for taking a risk. His willingness to have potentially awkward conversations about race has served us both well. If more partners were willing to take similar risks in connecting with associates, it would benefit the profession all around.

Terry Wade is a senior partner and Brandon Vaughn is an associate in the Minneapolis office of Robins Kaplan.

"Reprinted with permission from the Feb. 15 issue of The National Law Journal (c) 2016 ALM Media Properties, LLC. Further duplication without permission is prohibited. All rights reserved."

ATLANTA
BOSTON
LOS ANGELES
MINNEAPOLIS
MOUNTAIN VIEW
NAPLES
NEW YORK

800 553 9910
ROBINSKAPLAN.COM

ROBINS  KAPLAN LLP
REWRITING THE ODDS