

# The Missing Link in the Success Journey for Diverse Law Firm Professionals



At a time when in-house legal teams increasingly expect and value diversity on the outside counsel teams that support

their business, many law firms continue to struggle, and the meaningful development of diverse attorneys remains elusive. Law firms need to do a better job on this front, but they shouldn't stand alone.

Opportunities for success increase dramatically when both in-house counsel and law firm senior lawyers participate in spon-

soring the journey of success for under-represented attorneys, many of whom do not have informal channels to be developed otherwise.

Last summer, in my thirty-fifth year as a lawyer and following a career as a corporate in-house counsel that spanned more than thirty years, I decided to try something a little different. I joined a law firm, something that I had not done, as I began my career as a judicial clerk and then worked at the U.S. Department of Justice before heading in-house.

The decision to join Quarles & Brady was based upon my belief that there might be something a former general counsel could do from the inside of a law firm to assist in changing the paradigm that we see year in and year out about the lack of diver-

■ Cornell Boggs serves as of counsel and senior strategic advisor for Quarles & Brady LLP. He joined Quarles & Brady following a career as an in-house attorney at some of the nation's leading multinational companies in roles spanning from staff attorney to executive vice president and general counsel. Mr. Boggs currently serves as vice chair of the board of directors and chair of the governance committee at Thrivent Financial, a Fortune 500 financial services company. In 2017, he was recognized by the American Bar Association and the Library of Congress with a Burton Award as a Legend in Law.



---

sity, particularly among African Americans, in senior positions (especially equity partners) at U.S. law firms.

So where does this desire to change the industry dynamic come from? I begin with the simple notion that I would not have had a successful career had I not been sponsored by leaders in the corporations where I worked, particularly during the early years of my in-house career.

I began my journey as an environmental attorney for Monsanto Company in St. Louis. Our senior vice president and general counsel, Richard W. Duesenberg, was an engaged sponsor in every sense of the word. From the day I was recruited into the company, he painted a picture for me, sort of a snapshot reflecting why the company wanted me and what they wanted me to learn, develop, and work on as I began my career.

Mr. Duesenberg wanted me to focus on environmental regulatory law, because it was similar, but not identical, to the toxic tort litigation I had focused on as a DOJ lawyer in the Civil Division, Torts Branch, Environmental and Occupational Disease Litigation Section, where I defended the government in environmental claims filed under the Federal Torts Claims Act. This allowed me to branch into a new area, while building on existing expertise. Mr. Duesenberg made sure that I had a manager, Brent Gilhousen, who was equally focused on my success.

Mr. Gilhousen would check in with me each week to give me advice on my projects and to share stories of how he had handled similar matters in the past. He appreciated me as a human being and wanted to learn about me as a person. We both liked cars, so sometimes our one-on-one time would have an equal portion of law talk and Porsche talk. Mr. Gilhousen invited me to his home, and I got to know his family, and he got to know mine.

The company made sure that I had access to some of the top environmental scientists and environmental policy team managers, which further aided my educational journey. Fellow lawyers in our group, and in the litigation group, had open doors and were regular instructors. When I shifted from environmental law to our litigation team, Mr. Duesenberg ensured that I was able to work on projects where

I could learn from David Snively, one of our nation's premiere, litigation strategy minds. But the story does not end there.

Upon being promoted, I was moved to an operating division of the company, where I was able to support both Fran Werner, one of Monsanto's top female general managers who ran the company's func-

---

■

Opportunities for success  
increase dramatically when  
both in-house counsel and law  
firm senior lawyers participate  
in sponsoring the journey of  
success for under-represented  
attorneys, many of whom do  
not have informal channels  
to be developed otherwise.

---

tional fluids businesses, and David B. Price, Jr., then one of Monsanto's two African American general managers, who ran the company's phosphorus and phosphorus derivatives business. Both were excellent sponsors who supported my success. If Monsanto was trying to paint a picture of African American success to me, they did it through David B. Price, Jr.

As a young, Black professional in a world where there were not many examples of Blacks in leadership, I simply wanted to be like him, dress like him, and carry myself like him. Mr. Price, in turn, made sure I understood his business as I began to do work for him. We flew to Idaho and went down into the company's phosphorus mines, simply for me to see where the raw materials for the business were sourced. We then travelled to other cities where the company had plants, so I could understand the product refinement along the supply chain. This type of hands-on, one-on-one time was game changing, and offered me

an opportunity to perform my work successfully in ways that would not have been possible without such insight.

So, why do I offer this as background? My sense is that many of our under-represented attorneys have not had an opportunity to have the type of experiences that I describe from my early days at Monsanto.

While the roadmap to making a "course correction" in companies can happen by providing experiences similar to mine, the journey to "bright" is much more difficult for attorneys in law firms, many of whom are recruited with great promise, but are then left to fend for themselves when it comes to learning valuable skillsets, getting on project teams, and completing the requisite number of billable hours.

In-house counsel need to realize that many of their diverse law firm counterparts have never been "managed" or had a "manager," as those of us in-house have understood those terms to mean.

Companies typically have significant human resources organizations, tools, and cadences that often do not exist at law firms, at least at the ones with which I've interacted. What course correction is needed? The in-house counsel community needs to partner with their outside counsel client relationship lawyers, creating a two-way sponsorship that helps to provide diverse lawyers the type of experiences and skills that will enable them to grow, learn, and become a strategic partner for your company—which will in turn raise the profile of that lawyer within his or her own firm.

Law firms are not typically structured in a manner where they can do this alone—thus we continue to read the repeat headlines each year, proclaiming that meaningful change still has not occurred.

In-house counsel can paint a picture and chart a course for what success looks like at their companies. Who is their go-to person, and what does one need to know in order to become that go-to person? In my view, we will only see success when in-house counsel and their law firms find ways to define specific success strategies jointly for the under-represented members of our profession. Let's get to work.

*The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily of any of the organizations to which he belongs.* 