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Lessons from coming out in a job interview

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As a young would-be associate, Eric Ledbetter sought a law firm that welcomed diverse attorneys. More than 15 years later, his experience revealing his own identity in a job interview informs how he leads as managing partner of Quarles & Brady's Chicago office.

Ledbetter, a corporate immigration attorney, came out as gay during his job interview in 2006, nine years before same-sex marriage became legal nationwide.

"It was just a little different time, and I just wanted to make sure I was going to be comfortable wherever I went to," Ledbetter said. "And I also wanted to make sure they were going to be comfortable with me."

He had just graduated from the UCLA School of Law when the firm flew him to Chicago to interview for an associate position.

In his final interview, he told the partner he was speaking with that his then-boyfriend would need to transfer to a Midwestern school, as he was living on a student visa in California.

"The partner was not only very accepting but dove right in and started helping me problem-solve," he said. "So I felt good about it, and I



assumed they probably felt good about it too. And they must have, because they made the offer to me."

Q. Did you feel any trepidation about coming out in the interview?

A. I have to be honest and say yes, I did. I think for every LGBT person, we are who we are, and for some people maybe it's easier than others. I've been out for a long time, and I don't ever try to hide it. But you're always trying to negotiate that line between being who you are — bringing yourself to the situation, whatever that might be — and also not bringing it up unnecessarily.

I want it to just be a natural conversation, and in an interview setting, that doesn't typically come up naturally. And so you have to be a little proactive and put it out there. So I felt a little nervous about it, but as soon as I did it, I felt really good about it.

Q. How do you approach interviewing candidates when you're the one hiring?

A. When you're interviewing someone, you're trying to connect to that person. You're trying to understand what they value, what they're

looking for, what their vision for their future is. And so, as a person who now interviews a lot of people, I really view it as an opportunity for us to talk together and, as much as you can during an interview, to get to know that person and for them to get to know the firm to see if it's a connection.

In my mind, it's really more about finding connections than recruiting people.

Q. How does that perspective inform your relationships with clients?

A. A certain level of honesty and forthrightness is everything in terms of forming the relationship with the client, and it's a key aspect of communication.

If you're being one person but presenting another person, it just doesn't read. A client, or anyone, can really tell that you've become an enigma. It doesn't need to be in every conversation. But for sure there needs to be a baseline connection, and you have to be yourself to connect with people.

Q. What day-to-day methods do you employ toward your goals for diversity, equity and inclusion at the firm?

A. Every attorney at the firm can avail of a diversity mentor through partnership. We also have a diversity retreat.



Eric Ledbetter

It's important to make sure that when we form committees that we do so with an eye to diversity and gender balance. It's a powerful way for people to develop a presence in the firm so that they can be in a position to move on into leadership roles.

There are other things that we do that are official policies. But a lot of it, I think, is just informal, connecting with people and helping to ensure that as people come up through the ranks, they feel included and valued.

If you're in a leadership position, you have to reach out to people. Don't just assume they're hearing we have programs. You've got to go talk to people, make sure they're OK. Make sure that they really know your door is always open and that you want to hear what's happening with them.

Q-and-As are edited for length and clarity.