

Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Becker & Poliakoff's Jackson

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Yolanda Cash Jackson is a shareholder in Becker & Poliakoff's Ft. Lauderdale and Tallahassee, Florida, offices. She is an experienced attorney and lobbyist, who has established a reputation in the community for her leadership and commitment to civic, charitable and professional organizations. She concentrates her practice in the area of governmental relations and has developed a proficiency in state government funding and appropriations. Jackson has working relationships with several of the state's leading elected officials and policymakers.

A member of the firm's seven-member management committee and the shareholder in charge of the firm's Tallahassee lobbying practice, Jackson has received awards for her work in the community and for her clients. Most recently she was honored by Florida Memorial University, a longtime client, as "Community Leader of the Year."

As a participant in Law360's Minority Powerbrokers Q&A series, Jackson shared her perspective on five questions:

Q: How did you break the glass ceiling in the legal industry?

A: I do not believe that I have broken the glass ceiling in the legal industry. Rather, the glass ceiling is still intact although cracking more and more each day. When elected to our firm's seven-member management committee, my partners entrusted me with our firm's most important management decisions. This was a notable "first" for a person of color in our firm's history. My ascension to management required (like any other lawyer) that I produce an excellent work product, generate revenues to maintain the financial health of the firm, and gain the respect of my peers. I would have never even been considered had I not been a significant contributor to the firm's bottom line. I worked hard to build a practice niche. I turned contacts and colleagues, from throughout my community, into clients and referral sources. Founding shareholder Alan Becker gave me sage advice as I started my lobbying practice after litigating for 10 years. He said your goal is for people to start describing you as the best black lobbyist in Tallahassee, then pretty soon they will drop the word "black." Alan encouraged me to use my strengths to build a practice and it worked.



Yolanda Cash Jackson

Q: What are the challenges of being a lawyer of color at a senior level?

A: The greatest challenge that lawyers of color, at the senior level, have is to resist allowing the firm to make that person the savior for all people of color. If the firm is truly committed to helping to promote lawyers of color within its culture, then the lawyer of color should not be predestined to head diversity initiatives, for example. The senior-level lawyer should seek a variety of opportunities that will allow that lawyer to be as well rounded as possible.

Secondly, there is a natural tendency for the senior-level lawyer to spend a great amount of time doing community-related, nonbillable activities. Because lawyers of color are so rare, they are constantly asked to serve on boards and otherwise "give back" to their community. While it is a must, in my opinion, that all lawyers contribute to the betterment of their own communities, those demands often compete with the demands of the law firm. As with any lawyer, these demands must be prioritized and the lawyer of color, especially, must be mindful that the law firm is a business and not a social service agency.

Finally, senior level lawyers continually face the challenges associated with breaking new ground and barriers. They are always the "first"! In most instances, there are a few examples for the senior level lawyer of color to follow. Simply no one who looks like them has ever been where they are. Therefore, senior level lawyers of color are left to make it up as they go and identify mentors who also do not look like them. I had excellent mentors at Becker & Poliakoff who believed in me and helped pave the way for my success. I work hard to do the same for others coming up in our firm.

Q: Describe a time you encountered discrimination in your career and tell us how you handled it.

A: As most discrimination in the workplace is subtle and often hidden, I cannot recall a specific situation of discrimination against me in my practice. Early on in my career, however, when I attended court outside of the south Florida area, I was often asked if I was a client waiting for my lawyer and of course, I would proudly say that I was a lawyer. As an associate in the early years, I was often excluded from lunch invitations by my white male peers. I simply did not fit with the "lunch bunch." That meant that I likely missed some of the information-sharing that is often seen and experienced in social settings involving lawyers. Later, I started playing golf to break down barriers and be part of such social settings.

It is interesting to note that an encounter with discrimination led me to attend law school in the first place. In my previous career, I was passed over for a promotion. The person who received the promotion was a white male who was less qualified and did not have a college degree. I used my anger and disappointment to motivate me to continue my education and thereafter to become the first lawyer in my family.

Q: What advice would you give to a lawyer of color?

A: Generally, the advice I give to a lawyer of color is very similar to the advice I would give to any lawyer. "Do your best, enjoy what you are doing, and success will follow."

Further, I suggest to lawyers of color that it is perfectly acceptable to seek business opportunities within your own racial or ethnic group. It is not necessary to abandon who you are in order to achieve success. Neither is it necessary to become someone who you are not. You cannot change who you are but you can use who you are to make a change.

Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase diversity in its partner ranks?

A: A law firm looking to increase diversity in its partner ranks must create an atmosphere of inclusion throughout the entire organization. The law firm should be willing to recruit lawyers of color, increase the diversity of its support staff, increase the diversity of its vendor base, and increase the diversity of the organizations in the community which it supports. Inclusion must be integral to the culture of the firm. A good reputation of inclusion will net big dividends.

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