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How to Relate

Tips for a **white male partner** and a member of the **'model minority.'**

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Our firm has launched a full-scale mentoring program designed to increase associate retention rates, particularly among attorneys of color. Selected partners are assigned at least one first-year associate as a mentee and are expected to interact with that individual in both informal and structured settings.

I'll be working with two first-year associates, an African-American female and a Native American male. I want these experiences to be meaningful for everyone, but, as a white male partner (and a new one at that), I am concerned that I may not be able to overcome our distinct cultural differences. Do you have any tips or suggestions on how to make this mentoring process effective?

Stay focused on the common ground. Your role is to share information and insights that will enable two eager, new attorneys to navigate their way through

the unfamiliar terrain of your law firm's landscape. Trust me, your mentees are far more interested in the enhancement of their career development than any merging of cultural or ethnic backgrounds. While it is conceivable that they could be appreciative of any insights you may have in this regard, it is inconceivable that such insights rank very high as a priority for either. What truly matters is introducing the mentees to your firm's distinct culture and expectations, and identifying mechanisms that can help them become valued associates.

Take a moment to think back to when you were a first-year associate so that you can relate. Even though the playing field may have been (and still is) different for white males in contrast to people of color, this dynamic doesn't render the concerns of aspiring new attorneys dissimilar and, in fact, they are parallel in many respects.

I'm sure that you wanted to receive outstanding reviews. Well, so do your mentees. You probably felt it critically



important for your colleagues to like and respect you. Ditto for your mentees. And the high-profile, juicy assignments with power clients—you coveted them. Well, guess what? So do your mentees.

Unless cultural differences are used as the basis for allocating benefits and

burdens, they shouldn't be viewed as obstacles to forming productive mentoring relationships. Indeed, your perspective as a white, male partner is critically important since each of your mentee's performance will, for the most part, be evaluated from the viewpoint of a white, male culture.

You also should keep in mind that the cultural differences between you and your mentees may not be as distinct as you perceive and may actually be a creation of your own imagination. You and your mentees share a common background: the pathway traveled to arrive at the golden entry gate of a prestigious New York law firm. Increasingly, this pathway is noticeably similar for both people of color and

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white attorneys. The pedigree is virtually identical: similar socio-economic backgrounds and prestigious schools (law, undergraduate and even high schools). Simply stated, very few attorneys at New York law firms hail from inner-city neighborhoods or the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains.

So don't fret about any perceived or real differences. Rather, focus on what you have in common and use any unshared territories as a way to strengthen the relationship. One white male partner who practices patent law in the New York office of a major national law firm agrees. Having mentored several young associates from various ethnic and racial backgrounds (black, Asian, white, etc.), he emphasizes that in addition to their bond as attorneys, as patent practitioners, they are true techies: lawyers with scientific disciplines. This synergy provides another layer of compatibility that promotes the mentoring relationship and allows them to indulge their similar interests.

Even if you come across an unfamiliar cultural reference, just ask. It's really that simple. Your mentee will appreciate the display of interest—I'm sure you're aware of how vulnerable and insecure first-years can be. In the case of the patent partner, he had never heard of the concept of "jumping the broom" (a marriage ceremony ritual developed out of the enslavement of Africans in America) so he simply asked his mentee what it was and used it as an opportunity to maximize the mentoring relationship.

The partner also offers this bit of advice: "Whatever you do, don't try to act black" or otherwise feign an affinity with a culture that you're unfamiliar with. No matter how well-intentioned, you'll appear

disingenuous. Plus, you run the risk of looking painfully foolish.

Use your mentoring as yet another opportunity to enhance your professional image. Mentees who turn out to be superstars are feathers in the cap of the partner who served as their mentor.

This may not sound like a real problem, but as a third-generation Chinese-American, I am constantly reminded that Asians are the "model minority." Last year, as a summer associate at a New York law firm, one of my colleagues approached me to emphasize that I was "lucky" since I was Asian, smart and a minority so the firm would be apt to view me favorably. Now, as a first-year associate, should I expect some advantage to being considered a "model minority"?

Maybe, but the number of Asian-American partners at law firms doesn't seem to support that theory. Based on a 2002 survey of 215 major law firms, while Asian-Americans predominated among the associate ranks, African-Americans represented the greatest number of partners of color. Also, be reminded that there are two Asian-American Fortune 500 general counsel—two.

According to Andrew Hahn, Sr., an Asian-American partner at the New York office of Seyfarth Shaw and president of the Asian American Bar Association of New York, the term "model minority" potentially hinders the advancement of Asian-American attorneys because, first and foremost, it is a stereotype and, like any stereotype, it inherently fails to account for individual character traits.

And, even though the stereotype implies positive traits of smart, hard-working people who stay out of trouble,

Mr. Hahn considers these perceptions to be a limitation to increasing the numbers of Asian-Americans at the partnership levels. In his view, most law firms tend to promote associates who are perceived as strong, aggressive advocates both in terms of representing the firm's existing clients, and with regard to obtaining new clients. The "model minority" precept does not embrace these characteristics and in fact, embraces a contrary image of meek and mild practitioners.

Here's another point for you to consider. As explained by a senior Asian-American associate at a powerhouse New York law firm, the term "model minority" is potentially divisive among so-called minority groups. Let's take the big three: Asians, Latinos and African-Americans. If Asians are the "model minority," then by implication what type of minorities are Latinos and African-Americans? While each group may be perceived differently, the discrimination against each is real and debilitating: same leaky boat, different holes.

"Model minority" is a conceptual double-edged sword to be viewed warily and cautiously embraced. Mr. Hahn strongly suggests that engaging successful mentors and building professional (and personal) relationships through systematic and continuous networking will bolster your career success. His advice is right on target: work hard, be smart, be groomed and be seen. •

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