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## DIVERSITY | IN ACTION

# I'm Important!

How to deal with feeling **unappreciated** and **overlooked**.

**BY KATHERINE FRINK-HAMLETT**

**I** am an African-American male associate at a New York law firm with international offices. I recently completed my third year and know I do not want to stay at this firm. My assignments have been less than stellar and my work is not valued. I rarely receive any meaningful feedback and I'm not made to feel a part of the team.

Many of the other African-American associates shared these sentiments so they have left en masse—literally within a two-month period. The situation is so frustrating that a few of these associates left without another position lined up.

The firm knows there is a problem but absolutely no partner or anyone from our diversity committee has approached me about my future here. As the lone black associate, shouldn't someone discuss these developments with me?

You in particular and the rest of the firm in general.

The most effective way to deal with a problem is to acknowledge its existence and then communicate the issue to

affected constituents. Heads stuck firmly in the sand only exacerbate the situation. It gives the unwanted appearance of ignorance or total lack of concern.

Clearly, your firm has a severe retention issue that has adversely impacted African-American associates. That's problem number one. Problem number two: The reputation of the firm as a whole will suffer. Lateral recruitment efforts will become stymied, on-campus recruitment challenges will increase, and clients will begin to hear murmurs of discontent. In light of the severity of the losses, it stands to reason that the retention issue probably extends well beyond associates of color.

It's truly a shame that your firm's situation has deteriorated to this point since some of the defections could have been avoided. Firm action should have been taken immediately after the first few African-American associates announced their departures—particularly since they were so close in time. The diversity committee should have



convened with the partners in the affected departments to ascertain any possible issues. Any identified problems should have been addressed at the committee level.

Strategies to remedy the problem should have been discussed, with specific actions and

timetables implemented to eliminate or minimize the situation. For example, if the committee determined that there was extreme dissatisfaction regarding work assignments, then they had an opportunity to correct the situation rather than have their associates leave. Or, if the committee noticed that African-American associates tend to leave after the third year, systems could have been incorporated to intervene during the second year to identify concerns. The main point is that proactive measures can be used to stave off undesired attrition.

Additionally, and as a matter of course, all associates leaving the firm should have an exit interview to provide the firm with an opportunity to evaluate experiences and maintain ongoing

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Katherine Frink-Hamlett, a graduate of New York University School of Law, is president of Frink-Hamlett Legal Solutions, Inc. and can be reached at [katherine@frinkhamlett.com](mailto:katherine@frinkhamlett.com).

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relationships. To the extent the firm is legitimately concerned about diversity retention, particular inquiries should be made to gauge issues that specifically impact associates of color. This doesn't mean that diversity inquiries should be limited to diverse associates. Quite the contrary: If diversity retention is a truly a firm issue, it affects every single attorney and should include both diverse and non-diverse attorneys.

If desirable, efforts should be made to retain the associate. Furthermore, the associate should be contacted within a year's time and thereafter, on a routine basis (twice a year or so) to keep the lines of communication open. These communications can range from updates regarding the firm's diversity initiatives to core practice discussions. Retention is not only about the associates who remain—it also encompasses the message communicated to, and by, the attorneys who leave. Attrition is a natural component of a law firm's ebb and flow—it should, however, be a managed process, particularly as it relates to diversity retention.

At this stage, a partner in your department should, at the very least, attempt to discuss the recent departures with you directly. It behooves the diversity committee to take control as well and communicate a message to the firm to advise of their awareness of the situation and that they are evaluating measures to reverse defections. Within a month or two, a separate message from the diversity committee should be delivered with follow-up developments.

From the looks of things, you may have to initiate the dialogue. In any event, don't leave until you have an

offer in hand and don't jump at the first opportunity that presents itself. Use care in making your next career step. Hang in there!

**A**s a South Asian female associate in a major New York law firm, I sometimes get the feeling that my work is being taken for granted and my accomplishments are overlooked. My reviews have been solid, I work extremely hard and produce quality legal services, but still I don't get assigned to the juicy deals even though I know that I am well liked.

*I feel like part of this is due to the fact that I am an Indian female, since I know other attorneys whose work is not as good but who seem to get better assignments. What should I do to be recognized and get the type of work that I want?*

Speak up—repeatedly. But do so in a style that works for you and is effective.

Based on my discussions with South Asian female attorneys, several of them have encountered various stereotypical perceptions ranging from subservience to exotica. While generally South Asians are viewed as both diligent and intelligent (yet another stereotype), once you add the gender component there is a decisive shift. Traditional cultural expectations may act to further compound the situation since it is fairly acceptable and oftentimes expected that South Asian women behave in a non-assertive, non-confrontational manner. Even within South Asian families, males are encouraged to pursue careers with vigor while women are prepared for more domesticated roles.

Like many associates of color (and women), you have the unenviable

challenge of combating stereotypes associated with your ethnicity and gender that are completely inconsistent with being a dynamic attorney. Some of these perceptions potentially relegate South Asian women to peripheral legal functions and can effectively remove you from the center of the action. So while working hard is commendable—you now need to learn how to work smart.

Working smart entails communicating your goals and achievements in such a way that your peers and superiors feel confident about your addition to the team. It's perfectly acceptable for you to take credit for your achievements and, when possible, give credit to key team members in the process.

Make sure you are active in legal activities both within and outside of the firm. These venues provide you with an opportunity to show off your legal skills and further, allow you to learn from and associate with other successful attorneys.

You may even wish to consider engaging the services of a professional coach who can help you decipher esoteric messages that are unique to law firm culture. The coach also should be able to assist with developing strategies and implementing processes for your career success. So, be a peacock—strut! •

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