

Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Baker Botts' Cristina Rodriguez

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Cristina E. Rodriguez is a trial lawyer in the Houston office of Baker Botts LLP. While Rodriguez has handled and tried a wide variety of lawsuits inside and outside of Texas, her practice primarily focuses on professional liability litigation (a practice group she co-leads), complex commercial litigation, and employment litigation, counseling and investigations.

A founding member of Baker Botts' diversity committee, Rodriguez was the firm's first female hiring partner and is currently the leader of the firmwide Harvard Law School recruiting team. Among other professional and community activities, she serves as the general counsel for Communities in Schools Houston. She is active with the United Way of Greater Houston, currently serving on the women's initiative steering committee and having served as co-chairwoman of the young leaders component of the law initiative. She also recently served as a member of the board of the Phi Beta Kappa Alumni Association of Greater Houston. In 2011, Rodriguez was recognized as a "Woman on the Move" by the Texas Executive Women for her leadership at Baker Botts and in the community. She frequently serves on panels regarding diversity and gender issues in large law firm practice.



Cristina Espinoza Rodriguez

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

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

A: I can't legitimately say I've "broken" a glass ceiling, and there's a lot higher I'd like to go regardless. But I've gotten where I've gotten due to hard work, sponsors and some luck. Extreme hard work goes without saying at this level, and everyone benefits from at least a lucky break or two. What I didn't understand going in was the importance of active and powerful sponsors, even after I made partner. I've had two at my law firm. Collectively, they've given me access to clients, work, leadership opportunities, and credibility by virtue of having been vouched for by them.

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

A: Isolation can be a challenge. Generally speaking, there simply will not be a lot of people who look like you or who come from a similar cultural or, perhaps, socioeconomic background, whether among your colleagues or your clients. I am very proud to be a first-generation American. It gives me experiences and perspective that are, in my view, enriching and valuable. It also allows me to connect in a fairly immediate way with people of a similar background. But I'm still in the minority.

Being a lawyer of color at a senior level often carries an expectation of being the open door, the ear, or the helping hand to other lawyers of color. It might be an informal assumption on the part of the law firm or junior lawyers, or a formal expectation by a firm that lawyers of color lead affinity groups, serve as mentors, and represent the firm at "diversity events." No matter how eager lawyers of color are to serve in those capacities, it takes a tremendous amount of time, energy and emotional investment. I'll take this problem any day over the alternative of having no junior lawyers of color to mentor or help, but firms should recognize that the relatively small number of lawyers of color means that they may shoulder a disproportionate amount of these responsibilities.

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

A: The uncomfortable moments I've faced have usually been at the hands of opponents. Several years ago I was one of the lead lawyers in a nasty and long-running dispute. During a particularly contentious deposition, opposing counsel responded to my objections by stating, on the record, that he "felt sorry" for my husband. (This lawyer had not known me before this case and had never met my husband.) I kept doing what I was doing on the theory that I was appropriately defending my client and must be doing something right to elicit that response. But it played right into the stereotype of women as shrews, or worse. (See below about developing a thicker skin.)

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

A: Be prepared for and accept the fact that there will be few people who look like you or share a similar cultural background, particularly the more senior you get. Don't be intimidated or disheartened if you are the only person who looks like you or shares the same background. Use it to your advantage whenever possible, i.e., use your difference to connect with a witness, client or prospect. It also helps to develop a thick skin. (I continue to work on this; age helps.)

You should also leverage your affinity group networks. You won't be able to join every organization or attend every event, but invest in the groups that help you personally and professionally. I tremendously admire Dani Gleason, who created just that in the Hispanic Mentorship Network, a group of Hispanic women lawyers in Houston who meet monthly to discuss career advice and forge relationships. It's an invaluable resource and fun to boot.

Finally, pay it forward.

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

A: Two words: cultivate opportunities. Educate young lawyers about the differences between mentorship and sponsorship, and facilitate opportunities for meaningful sponsorship of senior associates and junior partners by senior partners with both meaningful work and a seat at the table.

Create a culture where opportunity and inclusion are top of mind on all issues, particularly in client-facing circumstances. Serving on the diversity committee or the associate development committee is good; serving on the compensation committee or the business development committee is better. Make sure that your leadership is diverse in all dimensions.

Actively support business development training with both internal and external resources. Bring in professional coaches who can help with communications techniques and systematically identifying and developing prospects, but also leverage the techniques and success stories of your best rainmakers. Preserving and passing down the business development DNA benefits everyone.

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