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Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Thompson Hine's Robyn Smyers

Law360, New York (January 08, 2015, 3:22 PM ET) -- Robyn Minter Smyers is the newly elected partner-in-charge of Thompson Hine LLP's Cleveland office and a member of the firm's real estate and corporate transactions & securities practices. She also is the immediate past chairwoman of the firm's diversity & inclusion initiative.

Smyers, who joined Thompson Hine in 2001 and was promoted to partner in 2006, advises some of the firm's largest clients, focusing primarily on commercial real estate acquisitions and sales, development, financing, leasing and corporate transactions, with a particular emphasis on shopping center deals, urban redevelopment and hospitality projects. She also represents and counsels real estate investment trusts, real estate investment funds, public and private real estate development companies, commercial lenders, retailers and other corporations in a broad range of complex transactions, including ground-up development deals and multisite, multistate acquisitions and divestitures.



Robyn Minter Smyers

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

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

A: I chose my firm, Thompson Hine, in significant part because its glass ceiling had already been shattered. Thompson Hine has a long and robust tradition of promoting women and minorities to partnership and leadership positions. I'm proud to be the partner-in-charge of the Cleveland office under the firmwide leadership of a woman (Managing Partner Deborah Read). It's worth noting that I'm the third African-American in my role at the firm. How many firms can say that? I'm privileged to stand on the shoulders of many who have gone before me.

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

A: The lack of a critical mass of senior lawyers of color at large law firms can result in a sense of isolation. Before becoming the partner-in-charge of Thompson Hine's Cleveland office, I was chair of the firm's diversity and inclusion initiative. One of the most critical activities of our diversity and inclusion efforts was our work to improve the connections among our diverse lawyers with bimonthly video conferences and yearly retreats. The

theme of many of these programs has been “sharing to succeed” because we understand that everyone needs candid advice, mentoring and support to advance. These activities have helped me, as has staying close through formal and informal meetings with a group of African-American women lawyers who serve as a sounding board and cheering section.

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

A: Without minimizing the impact that discrimination has on others, I can report very few experiences with discrimination and none that have posed real barriers to advancement. I assume the best of others, try to have a sense of humor, and don't hesitate to point out when people are engaging in stereotyping or exclusionary behavior. I often find that directly confronting harmful behavior in a nonconfrontational way leads to dialog, greater appreciation for the value of inclusion and a willingness to change. On the rare occasions I run into someone who appears to be an immovable object, I find a way around them and keep moving.

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

A: I advise all young lawyers that the key to success at a law firm is identifying ways to become indispensable and then working strategically to make it a reality. If you're no one's number one or number two go-to team member, you are not on track. If you are not on track, don't stick your head in the sand. Create a plan instead. The heart of any plan needs to be finding and doing work about which you are passionate, committing yourself to excellence, and developing mentors and sponsors.

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

A: The key is to emphasize inclusion, not diversity. Firms that commit to creating inclusive workplaces that focus on individual needs and encourage everyone to bring their authentic selves to work are able to attract and retain talent, including diverse talent.

Identifying hidden barriers to inclusion is an important part of creating an inclusive workplace. Our firm is working with Kathleen Nalty, a nationally recognized consultant on law firm diversity. She has helped us realize how diverse attorneys often have less access to mentors and sponsors, high-quality work assignments, candid and timely feedback, networking and other experiences critical to advancement. We've also increased our appreciation of the particular impact of affinity bias — bias for people with whom you share a background, interests or identity. Senior lawyers who are in the best position to assign work and mentor and sponsor younger attorneys can unwittingly let affinity bias impact their choices in ways that have the effect of excluding women, LGBT, racially/ethnically diverse and disabled attorneys. The best way to arrest this phenomenon is to educate people on the existence of affinity bias and its unintended consequences.

I would also recommend that law firms view diversity as an opportunity, not a problem. There is a clear correlation between firms that succeed in building and maintaining a diverse workforce and firm leaders embracing the notion that greater diversity results in better and more creative problem-solving for clients.

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