

Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Williams & Connolly's Ana Reyes

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Ana Cecilia Reyes is a partner at Williams & Connolly LLP in Washington, D.C., specializing in international business litigation and arbitration. She has handled complex legal matters for foreign government agencies, leading corporations, high-ranking corporate and foreign officials, and international organizations.

The National Law Journal recognized Reyes as one of the country's top 40 under 40 minority lawyers in 2011 and named her to their list of Washington, D.C.'s "Rising Stars" in 2014. Legal Times selected her as a "Champion" in its 2009 "Champions, Visionaries & Pioneers" edition for her work helping refugees obtain asylum in the United States.



Ana Cecilia Reyes

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

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

A: There are different glass ceilings at different stages of one's career, and the skills necessary to break through them change in kind. To become a partner, I sought out challenging experiences early in my career on which I could build. By diligently seeking out opportunities, I had demonstrated my litigation skills in a number of contexts by the time I was considered for partnership.

I gained experience in part by asking for complex assignments whenever they became available. More often than not, the partner and client said yes. For example, a case I worked on went to arbitration my first year at the firm. Even though I was new, I asked the lead partner if I could question witnesses at the hearing. Recognizing that I knew the facts well, he assigned me two witnesses. He then worked with me extensively to ensure I was prepared. A year later, a different partner asked me to question key witnesses during a jury trial. She gave me those witnesses in part because I had that earlier experience at the arbitration and had received positive reviews.

I should add that no one succeeds without a tremendous amount of help from family members, friends, teachers, colleagues and mentors. Helping others through pro bono work is a positive way to pay their generosity forward. And, as an added benefit, it is a perfect vehicle to gain experience. For both reasons, I accepted pro bono cases whenever I could. This certainly meant longer hours, but I appreciated the opportunity to help others and to gain experiences that helped my professional development. As examples, in one case, I made opening and closing statements and questioned witnesses at a hearing. In

another case, I argued before the Second Circuit.

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

A: Most mid-level litigation partners face similar challenges with respect to their roles on cases, responsibilities on client matters and in business development, and responsibilities to their firms. While similar, these challenges can present themselves to lawyers of color in more demanding ways. For example, outside parties can — often unconsciously — subject lawyers of color to different performance standards or weigh their advice differently than that of their peers. The attorney then has to work harder to prove him or herself, magnifying the burdens that face litigation partners generally. At a deposition a while back, an expert made a self-satisfied comment under his breath when he realized that I — and not my white, male colleague — would take his deposition. While he wasn't feeling nearly as relieved after the deposition, his comment betrayed his initial belief that I was a lesser lawyer only because of how I look.

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

A: I am fortunate to have attended the law school, and to practice at the law firm, of my choice. I was well-supported and encouraged at law school and continue to be at the firm. That isn't to say, however, that being a gay Hispanic woman has been without its unique obstacles.

I could not speak a word of English when I started kindergarten. I literally didn't know the English word for water, something I recall because my classmates told me it was "coke." More than once I asked a teacher for "coke," and was of course summarily denied. The language barrier and attendant lack of comprehension left me feeling isolated and anxious, not to mention thirsty. The experience sticks with you. Fast-forwarding, many of my peers have lawyers or business people in their families or among family friends to whom they can turn for career guidance, to open doors, for business referrals, etc. Since I have no extended family in the United States, I don't have that benefit. And, in general, being gay can make a challenging situation even more so. While everyone at Williams & Connolly has been very welcoming, not everyone I have encountered outside of the firm has been so. Contending with that reality in a positive and professional manner sometimes adds unnecessary stress to work interactions.

I address obstacles generally by seeking out teachers, mentors and friends to help me navigate them. My first grade teacher, on her own time and without pay, spent an hour with me most mornings to help me learn English. My college mentor, Don Dugi, was an important factor in my being accepted to, and ready for, law school. More senior lawyers at the firm have guided me from the moment I walked through the door and continue to do so. And thankfully I have a tight network of close friends who work overtime to help me succeed, both personally and professionally.

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

A: My first piece of advice is, if you need help or guidance, ask for it. Most attorneys are willing, and often eager, to help out more junior colleagues. But, we don't always know to help if we aren't asked.

I also would give the advice that has served me best:

Monitor and adjust. Things are not always going to turn out precisely as you planned or hoped. The ability to monitor a situation as it develops and adjust to it is a major contributor to professional success. The first corollary to this rule is, whatever happens, remain calm — convey "It's handled." Then

go handle it. The second corollary is to keep in mind that inevitably there will be setbacks in your professional career. Take stock, learn from a setback. Then dust yourself off, get up and go back at it. It's not always easy. It's never fun. But, I am a better lawyer, and a much better person, as a result of the lessons I have learned from my setbacks.

Surround yourself with colleagues you want to emulate. I am blessed to have spent my career at a firm with an incredible array of talented, kind and witty lawyers and staff. I am constantly learning how to conduct myself as a lawyer from their examples, and I enjoy working with them. I would urge any attorney seeking new employment to consider not just the job, but also the kind of people who will be his or her colleagues.

Be reasonable with opposing counsel. Not every suggestion opposing counsel has is wrong or necessarily suspect. Not every discovery request is unreasonably burdensome. Try to find a way to say yes or to compromise. Doing so will give you valuable credibility with a court when you are forced to make or defend a motion, will save your clients litigation costs, and, more generally, will spare you scores of needless headaches.

Recharge. Being a successful lawyer requires an extraordinary commitment of time and mental energy. It is difficult to turn work off after you leave the office, as there is always some issue that could stand further thought, an email that could be sent, or a plan to make for the next day. It's not advisable, however, to work or think about work 24/7. Take vacations — more importantly, take vacations without checking email incessantly. Do something non-work related on a regular basis that you are passionate about. I've recently started working towards my private pilot's license. For a couple hours every week, my only focus is to keep a plane in the air. I love every minute of it. I come back to my desk happier and with more energy, and I work more efficiently.

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

A: Certainly, it is important to increase diversity in the associate ranks. Without diverse associates to draw from, it's difficult to increase diversity among the partnership ranks. But expending time and effort on hiring isn't sufficient. Once the associates come through the door, law firms should take care to ensure that the associates are receiving the right type of mentorship. I don't think that mentors need to be of the same race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, although this may be preferable to some. Instead, ideal mentors work to ensure that their mentees gain experiences as young associates to permit them to gain increasing responsibility as mid-level and then as senior associates.

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