

Diversity – Law Firms

Diversity At King & Spalding: Fully Embedded In Firm Culture

Editor Julia R. Dillon interviews Samuel M. Matchett, Partner, King & Spalding LLP.

Editor: Please tell our readers about your professional background.

Matchett: I attended college at Morehouse, in Atlanta, and then the University of Georgia law school. After clerking for a judge, I made an unusual move: I went directly in-house, rather than private practice. It was a valuable and enlightening experience; I don't think I ever viewed the practice of law the way a first-year associate does. While many of my colleagues were junior associates focusing on legal research, I was in-house thinking about how to hire the best available legal talent for different legal issues. I was asking myself questions such as, how does this litigation fit into the overall scheme of things for the company? The broader viewpoint I gained early on informs my work as a practicing lawyer today; especially, someone who is very involved with the firm's diversity efforts.

Editor: Congratulations on being named chair of King & Spalding's Diversity Committee. How would you describe the firm's culture with regard to diversity, and how has it changed since you came here?

Matchett: Diversity is absolutely a core value at King & Spalding, and, as with our other core values – providing excellent service, being ethical and hard-working, giving back to our community on many levels – the firm takes it seriously and holds individual lawyers to a very high standard. Diversity is not something off to the side; it is an essential part of what we are as professionals and what we do every day. It's in our lawyers' professional DNA to mentor associates, including, of course, women and minority associates, and to encourage people to be open to those who are different from themselves. In my ten-plus years with the firm, I certainly think that diversity as a core value has improved, and this is not an accident. To foster change requires attention, intention, planning and action.

In terms of formal diversity-related efforts, one of the firm's former chairs, Ralph Levy, kicked off some excellent programs, especially firm-wide training efforts that enabled us to give lawyers more tools both to understand and act on diversity-related matters. Ralph, along with successor Diversity Committee Chairs Kevin Sullivan and Lovita Tandy, brought in outside consultants who interviewed groups across the firm to get a sense of what issues might be different, say, for the corporate teams versus the litigation teams. They made specific observations and recommendations which we continue to implement to this day.

Of course, at bottom, the skills that make for a successful minority or woman lawyer are no different from those required by any other lawyer. However, there are other "layers" to acquiring those skills. There may be differences in communication styles or comfort level in discussing certain things. Once we recognize this, we can put in place some type of training program or assistance to bring awareness to the particular layer and consider how to address it. The whole idea is to arm folks with tools to help them better cope with issues that can form artificial barriers to performance at the highest level.

Editor: I understand that King & Spalding has recently received a diversity

award from Chevron. The firm has also received similar awards from GE and Coca Cola. In addition, the firm consistently appears at the top of "Best Places to Work" lists for women and minorities. To what do you attribute these accolades?

Matchett: It is the culture, the people who are attracted to the firm and those who we try to recruit in the first place. There is no such thing as a King & Spalding cookie-cutter lawyer. People come in great variety, but at their core, they are alike in that generally they are all extremely bright, hard working and ethical. To such a collection of high-achieving professionals, our core values come easily.

Our former firm chair, Walt Driver, used to say, "You can't be smart enough at King & Spalding to be a jerk and still be successful." Being selfish and rude doesn't work with clients, colleagues or staff. It's antithetical to growing and prospering within the firm.

Editor: Does King & Spalding offer scholarships or fellowships to diverse law students?

Matchett: We do. We participate with the Lloyd M. Johnson Scholarship for first-year law students, which is an effort on our part to assist in the pipeline. We also have up to four diversity fellowships that we offer to second-year law students during the summer. These allow us to demonstrate our genuine interest in prospective future associates and to be competitive for highly recruited talent. We have sponsored both programs for quite a few years.

Editor: Are the needs of new associates different from when you were first practicing?

Matchett: Yes and no. Yes in the sense that communication is different today from 25 years ago, when I was a new lawyer. There is far less face-to-face communication, which I think is unfortunate. My bias is that learning the practice of law is an apprenticeship. While law school can teach you how to research and analyze the law, at least 50 percent of how a person learns to be a good lawyer – how to interact with clients, staff and opposing counsel; how to be a good writer; how to structure a deal; how to try a case – comes from personal interaction with an experienced lawyer. Part of the continuing challenge in training new lawyers today is to help both generations understand and cope with these differences.

That said, the skills necessary to be a successful lawyer fundamentally have not changed, and they are not based on gender, ethnicity, or age. It is important to recognize what has changed and what hasn't and not to get confused in that regard.

Editor: You served as president of the Atlanta Legal Diversity Consortium, of which King & Spalding is a charter member. Would you tell us about your work there, and how the firm works with it?

Matchett: The original goal of the Atlanta Legal Diversity Consortium, which started about a decade ago, was to assist law firms



Samuel M. Matchett

and law departments in making diversity a priority. About three years ago, we realized that diversity was by then on the radar screen for just about everybody, and many organizations in addition to ALDC were conducting seminars and training. So we decided to assess ALDC's role: Might there be some unmet need in the diverse legal community that we can address? The answer was yes, and at that point we changed our focus.

If you were to ask any successful firm partner what the key to his or her success was (other than their own individual hard work and intellect), almost every person would say "mentorship." We turned ALDC into an organization that provides training to fairly new lawyers that captures what lawyers would learn if they had the ideal mentor. Experienced lawyers lead very interactive 60- or 90-minute modules, many of which deal with real-life issues, such as what to do when, as an associate, you fail to deliver on an important project for a partner. The mentee is walked through how to limit the damage and even, hopefully, rectify their situation with the partner.

We may even go through a mock conversation. The idea is to get down in the weeds with the associate and provide tips that can be implemented immediately.

Editor: Several King & Spalding attorneys have been in the news in the past few years for their work in diversity-based associations. The firm also boasts many successful diverse and women award-winning attorneys. Would you tell us about a few?

Matchett: Dawn Jones is an incredible human being, and we are fortunate to have her at the firm. Both extremely hardworking and modest, she is involved in just about everything you can imagine – not just as a member, but as a leader. She has been president of the Georgia Association of Black Women Attorneys, the Georgia Association of Women Lawyers and the Gate City Bar Association. She leads pipeline programs at the firm for which we bring in high school students interested in the law and give them an idea of what it would be like to be a law student and how best to prepare themselves in college.

Brian Basinger is president of the Stonewall Bar Association, a statewide organization that supports LGBT individuals. He is an incredibly bright man who is most impressive because he is not only constantly coming up with ideas, but he is also ready to work on execution. He has risen through the ranks very quickly. Because we've been talking about mentors, I should mention Sam Griffin, a selfless attorney who serves as a mentor to Brian, and who likely let Brian know that there was a place for him at King & Spalding when we were recruiting top talent.

I don't know if we have enough time to discuss Ray Persons! He is one of the top litigation lawyers in the country, and that is no exaggeration. Like Chilton Varner, Ray would be on the short list for almost any major company litigation. We are incredibly fortunate to have him, and the fact that he is African-American is even more special because there are few minority litigation partners of his caliber. Despite constantly trying cases, he managed to sneak in a presidency of the Atlanta Bar Association. He also helped to found the pipeline organization Just the Beginning Foundation, and he continues to be a major supporter of JBF on many levels. He is an outstanding individual.

Partner Carolyn Alford played a key role in our firm's hiring committee. Formerly a hiring partner, she has been recognized nationally as one of the top lawyers in the country under 45.

Carol Brewer was selected as the Outstanding Member of the Year by the Washington, DC chapter of the Organization of Women in International Trade. She is a real trailblazer.

Meanwhile, partner Roberto Aguirre Luzi was appointed co-chair of the Bilateral Investment Treaty and Development Committee of the American branch of the International Law Association. Roberto helps our clients on very complex arbitrations for organizations like the World Bank.

Such people are important role models at the firm, because when minority and women lawyers look around and see people like these, a whole world of possibility opens up.

Editor: Please describe Flexible Strategic Partnering.

Matchett: This idea is a part of the firm's external outreach to work with women and minority-owned firms; meanwhile, it helps our clients achieve some of their own diversity goals. Most small women- or minority-owned firms lack the resources required to handle very complex matters – the discovery aspects of a case may involve hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of documents – so we partner with these smaller firms by providing such resources. King & Spalding has a discovery center with 80 to 125 lawyers whose primary responsibility is to assist in complex discovery, and they will do whatever is required to assist these firms. One of our minority partners, Bobby Woo, was instrumental in founding this program, and he runs it today.

Editor: Do you see the expectations of in-house shifting in terms of having diverse partners on their cases?

Matchett: I see it as an evolution rather than a shift. As law departments and law firms continue on their diversity journey, both are becoming better at measuring the success of their efforts, and more corporations are taking a sophisticated look at whom they hire or which firms they partner with.

Editor: Do you find retention of diverse attorneys to be more of a challenge than recruitment?

Matchett: It can be. It is a continuing challenge to identify, nurture and develop future firm leaders. Most of the people who graduated from law school with me were certain they wanted to be lawyers. I am not sure that is still true today, and I believe this phenomenon has contributed to attrition among associates. Expectations are different and evolving. I have noted, however, that once a person has made a clear decision to pursue a career in the law, it is much easier for both the lawyer and the firm to make mutual investments.

Editor: Where do you see King & Spalding's Diversity Committee in five years?

Matchett: I simply see the committee continuing its focus on observing, enhancing and implementing diversity initiatives. The committee is simply a microcosm of the whole firm, where every day we strive to be better at everything we do.

Please email the interviewee at smatchett@kslaw.com with questions about this interview.