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LAW FIRMS AND BLACK HISTORY:

WHY BLACK ASSOCIATES LEAVE FIRMS AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

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The Black associates who left your firm are a part of your firm's Black history, and let's be frank, they likely left because of the lack of value placed on them, the lack of professional development they received, or the lack of nurturing and investment in them.

It doesn't have to be this way. If law firm leaders actually commit to fostering an inclusive culture that encourages belonging and demands accountability, they can change this dynamic. As a result, their firm's Black associates will stay, grow, and elevate to the partnership, truly becoming a part of the current impact and future Black History achievements.

Efforts towards inclusion should be both individual and institutional. Lasting change doesn't just happen as the result of wishes and prayers. It requires real effort, significant resources, difficult conversations, and constantly monitoring initiatives.

The status quo

Over the past two years, in response to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor (and too many others), law firms have focused on Black lawyers by increasing diversity recruiting efforts and adding diversity programming. The pandemic further amplified the need for this focus, as many Black associates began to think differently about staying within toxic law firm cultures. Exclusion efforts towards Black lawyers (whether conscious or unconscious) included experiencing racial microaggressions and not being nurtured, developed, supported, or given constructive and actionable feedback. These actions—or lack of actions—have led to significant attrition and revolving doors at law firms.



CONTINUED...

I was going to include the many disappointing law firm diversity stats, but you can view them here and see them discussed here. This is not solely a story of numbers. We have to make these diversity and inclusion efforts personal and, as lawyer and social justice advocate Bryan Stevenson says, we have to “get proximate” with the issue. Things are not changing because institutions and structures are not changing. “We’ve always done it that way”, “If we increase diversity, we’ll lower standards”, and “They don’t fit here” are all false narratives that are surfaced to maintain the status quo. These need to be challenged and changed to improve law firm culture.

Strategies to consider and reflect on

So, in order to make it so that your Black associates become a part of your firm’s current Black History achievements, start to commit to doing things differently when it comes to diversity initiatives. Here are four areas you should consider as you reflect on and implement your strategy.

Education

If your law firm is not engaging in consistent and mandatory diversity training, this should be a part of your inclusion strategy...NOW. Encouraging leaders to advance inclusion without providing the foundational knowledge of diversity and inclusion terminology, concepts, and best practices doesn’t work. In fact, it often causes additional trauma to Black associates rather than supporting their success.



Impactful Mentorship

Impactful Mentorship: In law firms, often Black associates are either not mentored effectively or they are over-mentored and under-sponsored. It's one thing to tell someone how to navigate a path (skills, professional development, feedback, etc.) but it is entirely different to say, "Not only am I going to show you how to navigate, I'm going to lead you along this path". Mentorship across differences requires vulnerability, risk, and investment.

Which path are you willing to take?

So, which path of Black History are you willing to take for your Black associates at your firm? Click [here](#) for a list of individual and institutional reflection questions to help you assess your current efforts towards supporting Black associates.



Explore Doing Better

If you want to explore how to do this better through training, inclusive leadership coaching, and/or support with your strategy, reach out to me at <https://www.paulaedgar.com/news/#contact>.



BLACK ASSOCIATE IMPACT CHECKLIST:



Did you welcome the Black associate when they joined the firm?



Did you check in to make sure their onboarding was seamless?



Did you facilitate introductions to key stakeholders and influencers?



Did you speak up after that meeting when they were introduced as your firm's newest "diverse associate" or "diversity hire"?



Did you take the time to provide constructive feedback after their assignments?



Did you check in on their hours to confirm they are on track to meet annual goals and get their bonus?



Did you hear about a mistake they made and stand up for them when you knew your partner was treating them differently than other associates?



Did you ask why they were not invited to lunch after the deal closed with the rest of the deal team?



Did you ask them to help you develop a client pitch deck and offer the opportunity for them to attend and present a portion of the pitch?



Did you explicitly state in your email to them that you didn't need a response until Monday because you knew they seemed overwhelmed during your last meeting?



Did you approve their request to attend the affinity bar conference?



Did you ask how they were doing?

**This list does not encompass all actions that can be taken to help retain Black associates, but it is a good starting point.*



WHAT DID YOU DO?

NOTES

