

# Success Strategies For Minority Partners And Associates

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**Since you have to play the game, play it better than anyone else.**

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**MINORITY LAWYERS** engaged in a legal career in a large law firm need to employ a number of different strategies in order to be successful. The purpose of this article is to explicitly articulate the strategies necessary for your success and to encourage you to implement most, if not all, of the strategies discussed herein to maximize the likelihood of success. So let's begin.

### **Your Homework—Understand Yourself And Your Goals**

To be successful in this particular “game,” you need to have your head together in as many areas as possible. The first involves some deep thought and introspection about your goals—both short-term and long-term. What do you want to do at the firm? How long do you anticipate working there? Is this a short-term assignment or do you expect to retire there? What skill sets are you interested in improving? Do you ultimately want to be a judge or a politician or an entrepreneur or something else? The purpose of these questions is to get you thinking about your long- and short-term plans. You also need to have one year goals, and three- to five-year goals.

Once you have some clarity on those goals, you can begin your career at the firm with the end in mind. Skills development, compensation, and opportunities that move

you toward your goals are what you expect to receive from the firm. The firm expects to receive from you excellent work, a minimum number of hours annually, and for partners, a certain level of business generation. The firm may also want an external role for you in the legal and business communities, among other things. For this to be a win/win experience, both sides need to be clear about what the expectations are from this professional exchange.

The next step is to analyze the playing field. Be knowledgeable of the statistics regarding the advancement of minority associates and partners in the legal profession in general, in the city in which you work, and in your firm, in particular. Are the trends improving for minority hiring and advancement? The ABA Commission on Racial & Ethnic Diversity in the Legal Profession's *Miles to Go* report is a good source of such data. Also, review the data which NALP collects. It is readily available on their website at [www.nalp.org](http://www.nalp.org). The purpose of reviewing this statistical information is not to depress you, but to make you aware of the environment in which you are working.

Finally, if working in a diverse environment is important to you, you need to make sure that your goals and your firm's goals are aligned. You also need to make sure that you are working with your firm to support your goal of working in a diverse environment. I suggest to you that it is important to do something to advance diversity within your firm and the legal profession. It will be good for you psychologically and for the other minority lawyers who will follow in your footsteps.

### **Your Homework (Part Two)— Understand The Organizational Culture And Its Unwritten Rules**

If you are working in a large law firm in the United States, it is undoubtedly an organization which I describe as a white male-dominated hierarchical culture. As such, the organization will have certain unwritten rules and written rules which re-

late to the natural tendencies of white men within large organizations. Regardless of your educational background, you need to recognize this culture as different from your own diverse background. Conduct which makes people successful within this type of culture may not be the conduct which you would culturally choose if left to your own devices. This is not an insurmountable challenge by any means. All you have to do is pretend that you have just moved to work in Italy, for example. If that were true, you would need to learn the language and the unspoken rules of the culture. For example, anyone who has visited Italy knows that Italians like to have long meals. As an American in that culture, you have to adjust. You cannot fight that cultural custom.

Similarly, white male-dominated cultures have customs which you cannot fight. Some aspects of the culture you can push to change, but you must recognize that it is a cultural change process and it is lengthy. A cultural change process is what diversity and inclusion is about within law firms. It is an effort to culturally change the ingrained white male-dominated culture. One example of a white male cultural custom is the importance of self-promotion within the culture. People who self-promote appropriately are viewed as successful. People who do not self-promote are viewed as unsuccessful. For many minorities, self-promotion is considered "taboo" or at least highly undesirable behavior. Recognizing the importance of self-promotion within the large law firm culture, you need to figure out a way that you can self-promote in a manner consistent with your cultural values. For example, you can send email updates. You can tell people, who are the known gossips in the firm, about your successes and let them spread the news. There are a variety of approaches, but it is essential that you self-promote.

Align with people who will translate the language of the firm and tell you about the unwritten rules. Every organization has the way it signs its letters, the way it bills its clients, the way it shares or

does not share billing credit, and so on. Learn the rules before you break them. If you break the rules, do it intentionally and not inadvertently.

The language of the culture is best observed in the performance review/compensation review process and the hiring/promotion process. When your performance is reviewed, you need to make sure that your understanding of the review is the same as the firm's. There are hundreds of stories of people who received negative reviews but did not know it until it was much too late. This “disconnect” occurred because they did not understand the language.

### **Success Strategy One: Be Prepared For The Psychological Game**

The most important strategy is the first one—be prepared for the psychological game. As a minority lawyer in a white male-dominated organization you need to be aware of the role that stereotypes about your race play in the minds of your work colleagues. You should assume that most people will have had little or no real-life experience with a member of your racial group. If they have had a real-life experience with a member of your racial group, it is likely to have been a negative experience which they will unconsciously project on to you due to a lack of positive experiences to counterbalance the negative experience. Most stereotypes about minorities are negative in the legal workplace. Therefore, you need to be aware of that fact and realize that you will most likely be required to prove your worth and value to the firm on numerous occasions. This phenomenon has been referred to as a “rebuttable presumption of incompetence.” In the old days, there was an irrebuttable presumption of incompetence (i.e., you could never persuade anyone otherwise). Now, the presumption is rebuttable (i.e., you can persuade them that you are competent, but it will take some time and a great deal of effort).

One of the ways that you can keep yourself at the top of the psychological game is to stay in

touch with other diverse people. You need to do so to counteract the effect of the negative stereotyping that may be occurring in your work environment. Another important strategy for this particular game is not to take things personally. Many of the things that happen are not based on you personally, but may be directed to someone in your category. If you do not take things personally, you can stay objective and strategize better. You always want to be thinking five moves ahead, not reacting to events. If you take things personally, you are always reacting based on emotions.

One of the best strategies for keeping yourself at the top of the psychological game is to see yourself and your role at the firm as part of a bigger whole. You want to think of yourself in a way that will inspire you to continue on when the going gets rough.

### **Success Strategy Two: Mentors Are Important To Your Success**

You can be successful without a mentor, but it will be a much more difficult, painful, and slower process. Regardless of your position in the profession as a partner or an associate, you need to seek out multiple mentors based upon the goals you have identified. You need mentors within your organization to tell you the unwritten rules and to help you understand the culture and to translate the language. As you move up in seniority in the firm, you need mentors who will help you take your performance up to the next level. The higher you rise, the more subtle the cues that the culture provides. You still need help reading those signals.

You also need mentors outside your organization that will be useful in helping you chart your course and achieve your goals outside the organization. It is important that you have mentors of different races and of both genders. Make sure that your relationship with your mentors is a two-way street—one in which you give as well as take. Be willing to mentor others as well as seek mentors for yourself.

Finally, recognize the difference between a sponsor and a mentor. A sponsor within your organization is someone who will be at the table when decisions are made who can assist you and speak up for you. Your mentor may or may not be your sponsor. You need both sponsors and mentors. The more mentors and sponsors you have the more successful you will be.

### **Success Strategy Three: A Strong And Extensive Network Is Essential To Your Success**

You have probably heard that the world operates on a relationship basis. This is a true statement. It matters who you know, who trusts you, who owes you a favor and to whom you owe a favor. The person with the most extensive network of people who hold him or her in high regard and who can access that network when needed is ultimately the most successful. You cannot build the type of network you need to be successful by sitting at your desk and working all of the time. You need to nurture people in your network by emailing them and calling them and meeting them for lunch. You can nurture your network by working in charitable activities, civic activities, bar association activities, or business activities with them, but you must stay in touch. You must also follow the clear rules of networking. If someone does you a favor, you must repay the favor at a later date. Keep a mental notebook. Similarly, you should expect that your favors will be repaid by people in your network.

Your network needs to be as diverse as the world in which you live. You want to create a cross-racial network and a network that includes both genders. There is an active “old boy network” and an “old girl network” and the minority network is building and getting stronger as well. You need to be able to access all of these networks when it is appropriate. Additionally, you will find that being recognized as an external player will provide you with more value internally within the firm. Clients will seek you

out for access to your network and so will your colleagues. You can get things done when others cannot. You have increased your value and your opportunities by nurturing and developing your network.

### **Success Strategy Four: Self-Promotion Is An Important Component Of The Large Law Firm Culture**

As briefly mentioned above, self-promotion is an important aspect of the large law firm culture. White males self-promote. It is how they get recognized within the firm. If you fail to learn the appropriate way to self-promote you are doomed to fail within your firm. In my view, it is better to self-promote badly than not to self-promote at all. Why is that? In a law firm environment, perception often leads reality. If you are perceived to be excellent and successful, people will treat you that way. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Do not assume that others will recognize your worth. They will not do so. They do not have the time to think about you and your worth. That is why you need to tell them. Also, in this culture, people tell people how valuable they are. In other words, they self-promote.

If you are repulsed by this idea, you may have an easier time thinking of yourself as a celebrity who needs to build an image. That is really what you are doing within the law firm environment. You are creating the image of the person you want people to think you are. (It is extremely helpful if the image and the facts are one and the same, but they do not have to be.) Once you have a clear image in mind, your next task is to only release information which is consistent with that image. For example, if you have an image of a successful litigator in mind, then you only want to talk about your litigation wins. Save the discussion of your litigation losses for your friends and family, but not your work colleagues. We all have insecurities, but you need to be very careful regarding with whom you share your insecurities. As a minority lawyer, you automatically have visibility within the firm. You will

be observed, so make sure that you act consistently with the image you wish to maintain—both within the firm and outside the firm.

**Success Strategy Five:  
Understand The Metrics And  
Priorities Of Your Organization**

All organizations have objectives and metrics that are used to measure whether individuals are accomplishing the organization's priorities. Law firms are no different. Make sure you are focusing on the firm's priorities and not exclusively your own. You need to make sure that it is still a win/win situation, but you also need to accomplish the firm's priorities in order to be viewed as successful and to be successful within that environment. So what does that mean? Clearly, within a law firm context, hours billed matter. Make sure that you are on target for the minimum number of hours and to the extent that you can determine the median, you would be well served to be in the upper 50 percent with respect to hours. If you are a partner, it is likely that business origination matters. Determine whether increasing the business that an institutional client gives the firm is a firm priority. You will know by how it is measured and whether there are any monetary awards associated with that conduct. If committee participation matters within your firm, make sure that you have a significant role on a committee where participation is valued. The bottom line is you need to discern the priorities and make sure you are putting your maximum effort in the areas that matter to your firm. If you decide to stray from these priorities, at least do so intentionally, recognizing that it is likely to affect your ultimate success at the firm—either in the short term or the long term or both.

**Success Strategy Six: Recognize That Your  
Appearance Matters More Than It Should**

Because we are more visible, our appearance is more obvious. Because we are different from the

majority of lawyers in the firm, our appearance is observed for clues regarding whether we “fit” within this culture. People look at our appearance to gain information which may support the unconscious stereotypes which they may carry in their heads regarding minorities. Therefore, whatever you choose to wear, you must consider how it will be viewed by others.

It is also important to consider what the culture requires. One word of warning, do not use the lowest common denominator as your guide. I prefer to use as my guide people who are in higher positions. To the extent that your budget will allow, this will lead you to a more acceptable appearance for the culture. Remember that you are fighting against stereotypes and negative presumptions, so anything that supports those stereotypes will not be helpful to you achieving your goals.

**Success Strategy Seven:  
It's Important To Be A Player Outside  
Your Firm As Well As Inside Your Firm**

What is a “player” in this context? A “player” is someone who is held in high regard, who gets things done, and who brings good publicity or relationships to your law firm. If you are perceived to be a player, it is more likely that you will be valued and appreciated. If you are perceived to be valuable to the firm, it is less likely that the firm will do things to make you unhappy. Sometimes it is easier to be a player outside the firm than inside the firm. Sometimes external players are able to leverage that external status to increase their status within the firm. In any event, being a player externally can be useful if and when you decide its time to leave the firm. Additionally, it can be important in developing business.

How do you get to be viewed as a “player” externally? One of the most important keys is to be publicly visible. You can participate in bar association activities, not-for-profit activities, civic boards and commissions, or trade associations.

Take a leadership role. Honor your commitments. Create a public image through which people view you as a “go to” person. You want to be someone whose views are solicited and who has credibility. This means you must keep your reputation squeaky clean. As you pick your outside activities, try to pick activities that align with your goals and your work, if possible. These activities can be especially useful if you feel you are not developing as fast as you would like internally. Often, bar associations and not-for-profit boards will give you an opportunity to shine and improve your skill set—long before your firm will provide you with that opportunity.

### **Success Strategy Eight: Remember To Feed Your Soul**

One of the things that can sidetrack your career in a firm is forgetting to feed your soul. No matter how much you love the law, there is more to life and your life, in particular, than the law. You need to stay in touch with your friends and family. You need to keep your body healthy and take time to exercise. Vacations are essential—the longer the better. You need to give your brain an opportunity to relax from the stress of your everyday job. Find ways to get in touch with your creative side. Visit art galleries, see movies, write, and read books just for fun. Develop hobbies and other interests outside the law. It will make you an interesting person and keep you from suffering from burnout.

Another important strategy is to make your work fun. When you travel out of town, try to get there in time to have dinner or breakfast with an old friend. Consider staying over the weekend to do some sight-seeing. Spend some time in the new city at an art gallery or a museum. The more unpleasant your work assignment is, the more important it is to do something fun for yourself. Remember to make this a win/win proposition as we discussed above.

Finally, make sure you spend time in touch with other minorities. This will keep you grounded and in touch with your authentic self. You may find

minority bar associations a good way to combine being in touch with minorities as well as aligning with your legal goals. On the other hand, you may decide to do something that is completely separate from the law. The choice is yours. Just remember to nurture your soul every week, if not every day.

### **Success Strategy Nine: Stay Ahead Of The Curve**

Since you have been thinking strategically and objectively and reading the organizational cues, you will be able to stay ahead of the curve. By that I mean you will be able to recognize when troubling times are beginning to develop for you and you will be able to take appropriate action to defuse the situation. To stay ahead of the curve, you must be alert to signs of trouble on the horizon. You want to be several moves ahead. For example, if your main sponsor is thinking of leaving the firm, where will that leave you? Do you have another sponsor relationship which you have developed? If your practice group is no longer profitable, what does that mean for you? You should probably be planning on transitioning to another practice group within the firm or to another firm. In short, you want to read the handwriting on the wall long before it is a reality. That is the time when you have the best opportunity to maneuver into a better position.

In the event you decide to leave the firm, always try to leave on good terms because your reputation will follow you. You never know when your path will cross again with someone from your firm. Smart law firm management recognizes that as well. So try to make any separation from your firm a win/win for both sides. Seek the advice of mentors regarding the timing of your move and the next step for you. Access your network to assist you in the move. Remember, there is nothing shameful in moving to another opportunity. Just think of this as expanding your network.

**CONCLUSION** • Learn to recognize the realities of the dominant law firm culture. Many aspects of that culture have long been used to eliminate people who are different—and they still are. Enormous efforts are being made to change that, but the unfortunate aspects of that reality still exist, and

you have to do everything you can to both function within that culture and work to change it. In short, you want to play this game better than anyone. And to do so, you must stay ahead of the curve. Be strategic, not reactive.

### **PRACTICE CHECKLIST FOR Success Strategies For Minority Partners And Associates**

Minority partners and associates can succeed in the prevailing law firm culture, but it takes confidence, awareness, and strategy.

- Understand yourself and your goals.
- Understand the organizational culture and its unwritten rules.
- Be prepared for the psychological game.
- Mentors are important to your success.
- A strong and extensive network is essential to your success.
- Self-promotion is an important component of the large law firm culture.
- Understand the metrics and priorities of your organization.
- Recognize that your appearance matters more than it should.
- It's important to be a “player” outside your firm as well as inside your firm.
- Remember to feed your soul.
- Stay ahead of the curve.

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