

BigLaw Needs More Underrepresented Attorneys As Leaders

By **Ernest Greer**

This article is part of a Law360 Diversity Snapshot series of essays by five Black law firm leaders on improving diversity in BigLaw. Click [here](#) for a video featuring narrated excerpts.

What's happening in this country right now is not just about George Floyd, or any other individual victim. It's about America speaking truthfully about the racism that continues to exist in our nation. I like to think of this as America revealing itself. I call it the big reveal.

Even for someone like myself, a successful Black man who serves as co-president of a BigLaw firm, this is probably the most major moment in my lifetime — the first time conversation about racism has truly been a top priority.



I have lived with these issues every day of my life. Growing up in St. Louis, my family came from humble beginnings, and I was the only Black child in my class at a private school that I attended on financial aid. I am proud of my success, which was possible because those who came before me at [Greenberg Traurig LLP](#) have always believed in the importance of diversity and inclusion. I am a product of their vision and my own hard work.

When I joined Greenberg Traurig as a shareholder in January 2000, I saw that opportunity was possible because the firm had Cesar L. Alvarez, a Cuban CEO, at the helm. In 2007, at the age of 40, I became the firm's first Black managing shareholder and responsible for overseeing the Atlanta office.

I continued to break barriers and take advantage of the firm's platform as my career advanced, first to vice president and a member of the firm's executive committee in 2013, then becoming co-president in 2015. My focus now is on paying it forward: using my voice to draw awareness to the need for more diversity at law firms.

Diversity is important to the legal industry because it makes good business sense. Building a diverse law firm and diverse teams is fundamental to creating the legal solutions and strategies that our clients need to accomplish their goals.

It's not just about having one minority or female partner, so you can check the box. The vision is about having a plethora of people at the table representing diversity of race, gender, religious belief and sexual orientation. Each of these individuals brings a different perspective, experience, upbringing and background to solving problems, which is what creates better solutions for everyone.

Law firms need to put more focus going forward on hiring and retaining lawyers and business staff from underrepresented groups, including women, people of color and members of the LGBTQ community. Clients must play a louder, more visible role in this journey. It means doing a better job of creating an environment where underrepresented attorneys feel included at all levels of the organization and comfortable voicing their concerns.

That starts at the team level. Like everyone, underrepresented attorneys need a sponsor or mentor to pull them up. Law firm partners should make it part of their job to mentor and guide underrepresented associates; these activities are important because many underrepresented attorneys often feel isolated.

At BigLaw firms, cultivating the right environment starts at the top, with underrepresented attorneys in positions of leadership and power. That is the first key in making underrepresented attorneys believe in the same way that I did, that they have an opportunity for a path to leadership.

To create a more open and welcoming environment, I would urge managing shareholders to host monthly calls with underrepresented associates and partners to share what's going on in the firm. This is critical to ensuring that everyone has equal access to information. Firm leaders should also take a proactive approach to providing work opportunities to underrepresented associates.

Most importantly, how we define success at a law firm has to look the same for everyone. Saying we treat people equally is not enough; we must make sure we practice it every day.

The big reveal will mark a dramatic shift in our nation's history. The change won't happen overnight, but law firms must stop talking and take more action. I stand ready to do my part to write that next chapter.

Ernest L. Greer is co-president at Greenberg Traurig.

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