

Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Sidley Austin's Yvette Ostolaza

Law360, New York (January 02, 2015, 4:18 PM ET) -- [Yvette Ostolaza](#) is the managing partner of [Sidley Austin LLP's Dallas](#) office and co-head of the complex commercial litigation group. She litigates matters in U.S. state and federal trial and appellate courts on behalf of global clients. She also coordinates and tries proceedings in a variety of arbitration venues, serves on the Roster of Neutral Arbitrators and was admitted to serve on the CPR Panel of Distinguished Neutrals for the International Institute of Conflict Prevention & Resolution. Ostolaza manages and oversees complex internal investigations on behalf of companies, board committees and individual directors.

Her experience and results have earned her various accolades, including in 2009-2014 being named a "General Commercial Litigator" in Texas by Chambers USA; which noted that clients call her "a force of nature" with "every arrow in her quiver that you would want." Additional recognitions include being named in 2013 as a "Rainmaker" by Diversity and the Bar; in 2013-2015 as a "Litigation Star, General Commercial" in the U.S. and Texas by Benchmark Litigation; in 2012-2014 as one of the "Top 250 Women in Litigation" in the U.S. by Benchmark Litigation; and in 2012 as one of the 20 "Most Powerful & Influential Women" in Texas by the Texas Diversity Council.

As a participant in [Law360's Minority Powerbrokers Q&A series](#), Ostolaza shared her perspective on five questions:

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

A: I don't think I have broken the glass ceiling. As an office managing partner, I'd say that I have broken through one level, or one floor, but there is still a long way to go. Women still lag behind men in so many professions, not just law. We are making progress, but it's baby steps and until we have more women in the boardrooms, on management committees and yes, in the [White House](#), women are still working on breaking through that glass ceiling.

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

A: I've found it more challenging being a woman in the legal profession than a person of color. Growing up in Miami, the daughter of Cuban immigrants, I wasn't different from anyone else in my community. I didn't identify with being a person 'of color' or even a minority. If anything, my Hispanic background has provided many positive benefits. My Spanish language skills and the ability to view people and cultures from different perspectives have enhanced my work as a lawyer.

As a woman at a senior level, I'd say one of the biggest challenges is the need to constantly adapt to your environment. You have to feel comfortable being the only woman in the room and finding your place in a sector that is still very male dominated. Above all, it's important to be persistent, to work hard and to focus on understanding the challenges your clients face.

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

A: Gender discrimination still happens and when it does, it isn't subtle. Two experiences come to mind. The first was, as an associate, I was told that a particular client preferred to work with male lawyers. The second memorable instance took place after I was already a partner. The local counsel on a matter told the client that the particular judge on the case preferred to have pleadings filed by men. When this happened, I was both surprised and angry, but also so gratified to have the support of my firm who backed me up 100 percent. As a result, the

particular lawyer was replaced. I feel strongly that when discrimination happens, you have to speak up and call it for what it is.

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

A: Ignore the haters and don't be afraid to use what makes you different to your advantage. Throughout my career, I've made a conscious effort to reach out to female general counsel whenever I can. Not only have I been able to generate business through my network, I have also made lifelong mentors and friends. I believe that when women help each other, we all benefit.

I can't stress enough the importance of mentors throughout your career. Make a point of seeking out diversity and you will find role models that inspire you from all races, genders and cultures. A good mentor should provide you with skill building work that includes access to clients, regular feedback and career advice. In your turn, as you advance in your career, look for ways that you can be a good mentor to others. I've been a mentor and a mentee and both roles are equally rewarding.

It's also important that as you are developing your legal skills, you develop the skills you need to be a successful business generator. Business development, like any skill, is something you have to take the time to learn. Commit to spending time on it on a daily basis, even if it's only a small gesture such as forwarding an interesting article to a client. Like exercise, find business development activities that you enjoy and you'll be more likely to do them. Above all, don't make the mistake of assuming that anyone is going to hand you business or make it easy for you.

You really have to put yourself out there as much as possible. Maintain your enthusiasm for assignments large and small and make sure you are the kind of person folks want on their team when the going gets tough.

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

A: Law firms need to have a formal process in place for increasing partner diversity and that process needs to be as specific as possible. Commit to it, talk about it, write it down and stay focused on the goals that you set. Pursue qualified lawyers in your key practices and demonstrate that your firm can not only attract, but retain diverse lawyers. Head counts and other numbers matter, but people do see through lawyers who are not qualified.

Make sure that you are doing all you can to ensure qualified lawyers in your firm make partner and be vigilant about endorsing diverse lawyers to clients. From a client's perspective, the skill sets of in-house team members can be hard to distinguish, so they rely on you to single out and endorse those that excel in a particular area. Senior partner affirmation is critical to successfully transferring and keeping clients within a firm.

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