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A Progressive Approach to Law Firm Diversity Issues

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In 2006, as a result of a comprehensive research study it had performed, the ABA's Commission on Women in the Profession issued a report on the experiences of women of color in law firms. The report, titled *Visible Invisibility*, shocked many in the profession by revealing that women of color continued to leave law firms and the legal profession at an alarming rate that was much higher than their peers. Further, the study found that many of those who remained in the profession believed that their race and gender impeded them from assuming more prominent roles in their organizations. This report ran contrary to the belief of many in the legal world that the profession had made great strides in the area of diversity.

As Katten's Chief Diversity Partner, I certainly wasn't surprised by the report. However, it did leave me wondering if there was something more that we could do to reverse this disturbing trend.

Progress has been made in recent years, but clearly, the legal profession still struggles to retain minority and women attorneys. A number of firms have made significant strides in addressing these retention challenges, but there is always something more that can be done. Furthermore, many efforts have been made by the Chicago legal community at-large to address these issues, but more needs to be done by firms internally to support and empower their women of color.



To help accomplish this at Katten, we consulted Dr. Arin Reeves, one of the nation's preeminent diversity consultants and a key architect of the ABA's study. We sat down earlier this year and developed the idea for an ongoing internal program which would start with a day long workshop and be structured so that ongoing strategic programming would be based on the concerns voiced by the participants and build on the issues discussed during the workshop. From this idea, the Katten Leadership Institute for Women of Color was born.

resources at Exelon Corporation, Connie L. Lindsey, executive vice president of The Northern Trust Company, and University of Chicago Graduate School of Business professor Tanya Menon Gandhi. Throughout their careers, these women have experienced and overcome many of the same issues and challenges that female attorneys of color currently face throughout our profession. Being able to turn to such an esteemed group of women for support and advice was incredibly valuable to our lawyers.

Support from Chicago's Leaders

We launched our program on July 24, 2007 with a day of interactive workshops designed to assist female attorneys of color from all of the firm's offices in growing their careers to their fullest potential. A key component of making this program a success was that a number of Chicago's top minority female business executives agreed to serve as panelists for the various workshops, discussing networking skills, career choices, internal and external visibility, maintaining personal strength and stamina, building support systems and marketing. For the inaugural event, the speakers included Melody Hobson, president of Ariel Capital Management, LLC, Andrea L. Zopp, senior vice president of human



Just the Beginning

While the inaugural event was a success, the long-term success of this initiative can only be ensured by an ongoing program that responds specifically to the needs of its participants. To this end, a major component of the first Leadership Institute was soliciting attorney input. It is critical that a law firm seek the feedback of its diverse female attorneys, both about the firm environment and the tools and programming needed to maximize their success. Firms must then take the next step of incorporating attorney feedback into their future programming.

With the launch of the Leadership Institute for Women of Color, Katten is taking the critical next step toward bringing the retention rate for women of color in our firm in line with the majority population in the industry. We hope that other firms will follow suit.

About the Author: Leslie D. Minier is Chief Diversity Partner at Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP and a partner in the Firm's Corporate Practice. She has pioneered Katten's ascension as one of the nation's leaders in the area of law firm diversity since becoming chair of its Diversity Committee in 2003. Ms. Minier assisted the Firm in crafting its initial diversity commitment statement and strategic diversity plan, and has led a number of national initiatives aimed at the promotion, development and retention of minority attorneys in the legal profession. These included the establishment of a firm-wide minority attorney retreat and firm-wide minority newsletter, "Connecting Katten." In addition to her diversity efforts within Katten, Ms. Minier devotes a significant portion of her time to endeavors aimed at promoting diversity in the Chicago legal and business communities, as well as nationally.