

# Women In Law 2008

## Whether In House or at a Large Firm, Keys to Success for Women of Color Remain the Same

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*This year, the ABA issued a follow-up report to its 2006 Visible Invisibility study, titled From Visible Invisibility to Visibly Successful, which sought to identify strategies for law firms to achieve long-term success in the retention and advancement of women of color, as well as strategies that contribute to the sustained success of women of color in the profession. As part of this study, the ABA gathered information, insights and advice from 28 female law firm partners of color in order to compile the beginnings of a "blueprint" for career success:*

- "Believe in yourself, and do not let anyone shake your belief in yourself."
- "Give excellence. Get success."
- "If you can't find mentors, you have to make mentors."
- "It takes a village to raise a lawyer."
- "Network, network, network."
- "It's all about that book [of business]."
- "Take care of yourself."
- "Show up. Speak up."

*While the ABA's excellent research has focused exclusively on women of color in large law firms, I felt that it would be beneficial to speak with a cross-section of female attorneys of color who have followed a variety of different career paths in order to understand their views on some of the topics covered by the ABA, as well as other issues they feel are important for women of color. Not only was this informal research beneficial to me personally as a black female attorney, but it was also critical for the development of future programming for my firm's Leadership Institute for Women of Color. Launched in 2007, the Leadership Institute for Women of Color is a program established to proactively address the issue of women of color leaving law firms by providing them with the tools necessary to ensure their long-term success as Katten attorneys.*

### **Confidence and the Path to Success**

*"Believe in yourself and strive for excellence. You have to put your best foot forward at all times, and if you do people will recognize excellence sooner or later, regardless of race or gender. While this is good advice for anyone in the legal profession, it takes on added importance for minorities and women because even today, there are still barriers that we face and glass ceilings to be broken." – Judge Ann C. Williams, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit*



*"You, and not anyone else, are in control of your own success, so you must be proactive and go out and get what you want. There will always be people that make assumptions about you based on race and gender. You need to know that it does not impact how you do your job and simply ignore it. You cannot control other people's responses to you, but you can control your reactions to them and the work product that you deliver." – Ritu Vig, Senior Securities Counsel, Wm. Wrigley Jr. Company, and a former Katten associate*

*"If you are a great lawyer who offers outstanding client service, there will be multiple paths to success available to you regardless of race or gender. The surest way to fail in the legal profession is by getting a reputation for being difficult to work with...if this happens, you'll never be able to get or give the very best work." – Veta Richardson, Executive Director of Minority Corporate Counsel Association and formerly an in-house attorney*

### **Challenges**

*"While I was still in private practice, there were times when it did feel like I was being judged or treated differently because I was a female and a minority attorney. Was it always to my detriment? Not necessarily. When they were, I don't think I dealt with anything that was different from what other female and/or minority attorneys have dealt with. More often than not, it was dealing with being the only female and/or minority attorney in the room and wondering if that impacted at all the client's or opposing counsel's opinions or treatment of you." – H. Pam Chen, Associate University Counsel, University of Illinois-Chicago and a former Katten associate*

*"Minorities tend to be underestimated, but it's something that I have always used to my advantage. For example, when I was a litigator, opposing counsel often assumed that I would not be prepared, but more often than not, I outperformed them in the courtroom by doing my homework and essentially outworking them." – Maribel Mata Benedict, partner in Katten's Public Finance Practice and former sole practitioner at Latina-owned firm*

*"The issue of race and women is very front-and-center in large law firms, however in my in-house experience at Wrigley, where we have a phenomenally diverse team, I have not faced these same issues." – Ritu Vig*

### **Mentors**

*"It is critical to find at least one natural mentor in the firm who you trust and respect. If you can develop a natural mentoring relationship with a female attorney of color, that is especially helpful, but the key is to find a mentor with whom you feel comfortable and who is interested in helping you develop and succeed." – Alais L.M. Griffin, partner in Katten's Litigation and Dispute Resolution Practice*

### **Becoming a Rainmaker**

*"When I graduated from law school, I was still maturing, as are most 23 year-olds, and the thought of having to one day engage in business development and do the things it takes to land clients at law firms was pretty intimidating, especially for a woman of color who stands out from the majority. For me, going in-house seemed more attractive because I thought I could avoid client development. Little did I know that you still need to develop those same skills to advance your career in-house or otherwise, and to be the person people choose for the best assignments." – Veta Richardson*

*"The surest path to success in a law firm environment is honing first your legal skills and then your ability to develop business. The combination of these talents is unstoppable." – Tasneem K. Goodman, Katten partner and Director of Marketing*

***"You, and not anyone else, are in control of your own success, so you must be proactive and go out and get what you want."***

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