

For Midsize Law Firms, Curbing Boys-Club Culture Starts with Diversity at the Top

By Amanda O'Brien
November 22, 2024

What You Need to Know

- Despite diversity efforts coming under fire, law firms are still looking at ways to create more inclusive cultures and shed boys-club-like cultures.
- Midsize firm leaders highlighted smaller talent pools and less frequent leadership changes as challenges to adding more diverse attorneys.
- Leaders also emphasized communication as key, finding ways to elevate diverse voices in spite of a lack of diverse leaders.

While boys-club culture harassing behavior can — and does — occur at firms of any size, midsize firm leaders and DEI experts acknowledged that being on the smaller side can make crafting an inclusive environment more challenging.

“On the one hand, you would think [creating cultural norms] is easier because people are more visible to each other. In a giant firm it may be harder to implement a particular policy because you’re trying to carry that out across a broader band of people,” said Kleinbard managing partner Mary Beth Gray. “On the other hand, the representation of different groups might be smaller. You have to work harder



Credit: nanzeeba/Adobe Stock

to find people who move outside of a very homogeneous population.”

Regulatory member Kristi Richard of Louisiana-founded firm McGlinchey Stafford, who also serves as co-chair of the women’s initiative at the firm, pointed out other midsize challenges to inclusivity, including localized office cultures spread across a geographic footprint and, depending on economic conditions, a tighter budget impacting diversity and inclusion program funding.

According to AKS Advisors founder and principal Amie Santos, most firms employ a “strict zero-tolerance policy” to combat offensive or harassing behavior, including but not limited to

investigating allegations quickly and respectfully. Yet she also highlighted efforts such as annual training, investment in safe spaces like affinity groups, and promoting a diverse leadership tier as instrumental in creating a healthier firm culture.

Change Starts at the Top

For midsize firms, promoting diverse leadership might be easier said than done.

Richard and Gray pointed to a smaller talent pool as complicating developing a pipeline of diverse talent, while Archer & Greiner chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer Shelley Smith added that midsized firms don't have a large number of leaders, nor do they rotate those leaders frequently.

"Size can make things more challenging because when you're smaller, the opportunities to make changes in leadership positions, ranging from the top to practice group leaders and supervisory positions, are less frequent," Smith explained. "Those changes occur less frequently than at a larger firm."

That's not to undersell the importance of having a diverse leadership team, which can bring together "people who have viewpoints that reflect a different set of experiences than the typical white male leadership culture that has historically existed at law firms," in Smith's words.

"That will, by virtue of coming from those perspectives, challenge those norms around behavior in the workplace so that the culture of the firm can become more sensitive to different points of view and different sets

of people," Smith said. But in the longer rotation cycle of leaders, Smith suggested, firms can take up diversity initiatives and programs to provide smaller opportunities for leadership and bring visibility to diverse individuals at a firm.

"You can create opportunities for leadership at a lower level than just firm management so you're expanding what leadership looks like more generally at the firm," Smith continued, adding that firms can also reevaluate how often they are selecting new leaders and make leadership transitions more frequent.

Richard added that cultivating diverse leadership is a long-term effort that requires investing in employees from the very beginning of their employment.

"The key that we've learned in talking to others is setting people up to do those things [needed for leadership]," she said. "You have to build that pipeline starting when they're associates ... setting them up at that point to build a culture of inclusivity and respect, and then giving them the skills and the leadership abilities and training them from there, so that you know you have a person able to step into roles because they're qualified to do so."

Giving Diversity A Voice

In the absence of diverse leaders at the ready, firm leaders recommend finding ways to offer diverse individuals, regardless of seniority, a chance to have their voices heard.

"What we try to do ... is be cognizant of [diversity] and ultimately trying to get diverse people, such as women, people of color, the

LGBTQ+ community, in some of those positions where their voices are heard a bit more and can direct action,” Richard said.

Gray agreed, additionally emphasizing the importance of communication among diverse groups of people.

“If you’re at a firm and there isn’t anyone from a certain group in senior leadership, find someone,” she said. “Having the opportunity to have that conversation with someone whose experience isn’t like yours and having people in the room is essential. ... It’s the seniority part of it that’s tricky — that allyship across seniority is really important.”

In order to encourage communication across seniority levels throughout the firm, Gray mentioned that Kleinbard is focusing on one-on-one mentorship as well as finding opportunities for women-only meetings amongst attorneys and staff members.

“We’re making sure senior lawyers are working closely with junior lawyers, with the hope that relationship will lead to a more open conversation between two people who have developed trust,” Gray said. “And the other

thing we’re doing now is finding opportunities for all the women in the office to be together without men there....everyone is the same gender and there’s a mix of relationships. If my paralegal feels very comfortable speaking with me, people can see that.”

Smith, meanwhile, put together a group of diversity advocates ranging across seniority and staff roles to help put together diversity programming.

“One of the initiatives we started when I joined in 2021 was [creating] a broad ... group of diversity advocates. ... We solicited members of the firm at all levels to volunteer to be part of the group,” Smith said. “The role of the advocates is to recommend activities and policy changes that will help to enhance the culture of the firm.

“It’s important to keep our eye on the ball and remember that diversity gets reduced to an acronym, but it’s really about people, human beings,” Smith continued. “It’s important to serve those human beings in ways that nourish them and encourage their growth and development.”