

Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Dechert's Hector Gonzalez

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Hector Gonzalez is a partner in Dechert LLP's New York office and former assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District of New York, where he served as chief of the narcotics unit. He also previously served as an assistant district attorney in the Appeals Bureau of the Manhattan District Attorney's Office.

Gonzalez advises corporations and executives, focusing on complex commercial litigation, criminal and related civil and administrative matters, SEC and CFTC enforcement proceedings and internal, grand jury and state attorneys general investigations. He also represents clients in Foreign Corrupt Practices Act and Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act matters. He has tried more than 20 federal and state jury trials and argued more than 30 cases before federal and state appellate courts.



Hector Gonzalez

Since joining Dechert, Gonzalez has played an active role in firm leadership and currently serves as the firm's deputy chairman for diversity and inclusion. He also serves on the Hispanic National Bar Association.

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

A: With luck, perseverance and flexibility. Luck because I was fortunate enough to have mentors throughout my career, who took the time and made the personal investment in my professional development. These folks provided me with the guidance I needed in order to deal with mundane everyday issues that a young lawyer confronts in his or her practice. They were there also when I needed advice about significant career choices, like deciding to leave private practice early in my career to pursue positions in government. Beyond guidance and advice, they also created opportunities for me by helping me make the kind of professional connections that continue to this day. By perseverance and flexibility what I mean is learning how to set goals, sticking with those goals, but as importantly having the willingness and confidence to adjust those goals as circumstances demand.

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

A: I think that one of the most significant challenges a lawyer of color confronts is not being given the benefit of the doubt. In other words, because of implicit bias or stereotyping, assumptions are made

about how it is he or she has achieved success. The initial impression is often not that the lawyer has gotten to this level in his or her career solely on the basis of merit and hard work, but rather because of some unfair advantage as a result of his or her race or ethnicity.

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

A: Right after graduating from law school and starting as a first-year associate at a major NYC law firm, I realized that, unlike my colleagues in the first-year class, I wasn't having any luck scoring the firm's tickets for sporting events. When I made inquiries of the person who handled the tickets, I was told that the tickets were only for attorneys and not for staff. I didn't make a big deal of the remark. I simply responded that, even though I was still waiting to be admitted, I understood that the firm nevertheless considered me to be a lawyer. She quickly realized her mistake and apologized both in words and in kind (I got all the tickets I wanted after that).

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

A: Don't give up. Being successful as a lawyer is not easy, regardless of whether you're an attorney of color or in the majority. Beyond doing the obvious — working hard and providing first-rate client services — understand that achieving success is not a solitary endeavor. The successful lawyer got to that point in his or her career by also establishing deep personal relationships with peers and supervisors. Nourishing and growing your network of professional acquaintances has to be as much of a priority in your professional development as is honing your lawyering skills.

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

A: Don't be afraid to take some risks when it comes to hiring junior associates. You will never have a sufficient pool of diverse partner candidates until you increase the size of the diverse associate pool. Often, the only way to do that is by stretching your preconceived notions of what it takes to succeed as an associate at your firm. But, once you've made the decision to be more creative in your hiring decisions, don't allow a sink-or-swim culture to nullify whatever gains you've made in recruiting. Set up structures for monitoring the progress of diverse associates at all phases of their career and be willing to have frank and constructive dialogue with these associates to ensure their success.

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