

Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Dechert's Laura Ciabarra

Law360, New York (December 19, 2014, 1:42 PM ET) --

Laura Gonzalez Ciabarra is the managing partner of Dechert LLP's Hartford office and a member of the firm's executive committee. Ciabarra advises on subordinate lending with an emphasis on mezzanine finance and complex intercreditor and co-lender arrangements. She regularly represents major real estate funds, banks and other financial institutions on large-scale transactions involving complicated mezzanine and subordinate debt structures. For example, she led the team representing all of the mezzanine investors in the record-breaking \$38 billion Blackstone Group acquisition of Equity Office Properties and then reprised that role on behalf of the junior mezzanine lenders in Blackstone's \$26 billion acquisition of Hilton.



Laura Gonzalez Ciabarra

Since 2006, Ciabarra has been recognized as a leading New York real estate finance lawyer by Chambers USA. In addition, The Legal 500 (U.S.) has recognized her as a leading New York mezzanine finance practitioner and capital markets practitioner every year since 2007. She was also recognized for real estate law in the 2014 edition of The Best Lawyers in America and was recently selected as a Woman Worth Watching for 2015 by Profiles in Diversity Journal. Ciabarra is the first Hispanic and the first openly gay partner to be elected to the firm's executive committee.

As a participant in Law360's Minority Powerbrokers Q&A series, Ciabarra shared her perspective on five questions:

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

A: By seizing opportunity and not letting uncertainty (which we all experience at times), turn into hesitation or indecision. Like every ambitious young attorney, I worked hard, sought out relationships with those I hoped would be mentors and advisers, and tried to be proactive about my professional development. Two of the most defining moments in my career are extremely similar, because both involve taking risks. As a senior associate, I was experiencing friction with a partner over different work styles on a deal. When I brought this up, he gave me a flip answer — I had two options, do things his way or run the deal on my own. Without giving myself time to second-guess things (or him time to say he did not mean it), I said I would do the deal without him. That project connected me to the investment

banker who would become my very first client. Years later as a junior partner I unexpectedly had a chance to land a big deal, but it was of a size and scope far beyond my experience level and I was genuinely worried that I could not do it. I stayed up all night weighing my options: pursue the deal and risk derailing my career and impairing my reputation if I handled it poorly, or play it safe and not chase the project, knowing there would be another deal in the future where I could try to make my mark. I chose to take the risk and fight to get the work. That project turned out to be a record-breaking deal, and my role in it gave me name recognition and established me as a serious presence in that market. I keep an old fortune cookie message on my desk. It says “a bold attempt is half of success.” I agree ... taking risks has been critical to my successes.

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

A: A unique challenge of being a senior attorney of color is the dual sense of isolation and having a high profile at the same time. Diverse senior attorneys are still too rare in our industry and finding peers to connect with takes effort. Despite progress over the 20 years I have been practicing, I still find myself often the only woman in the room (or on the call or on the deal) and certainly always the only attorney with a multidiverse background. You can feel invisible sometimes. Yet, on the flip side, being one of those few senior lawyers of color can bring on a high degree of (sometimes uncomfortable) visibility. When there are few choices for firms looking to promote or develop their diversity, attorneys of color often find themselves doing double duty — having to be both models of excellent lawyering and the face of diversity for their firms.

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

A: As a triple minority, I have experienced a range of discrimination, from overt to largely unintentional. How I choose to handle it has evolved over time. As a summer associate at my first firm, I was shocked when a white, male summer associate said to my face that I had only gotten my spot so that the firm could “check a box” that they had hired a minority student. He proceeded to call me “CB” throughout that summer. I handled that situation indirectly and silently, by outperforming him and taking enormous satisfaction when I got an offer at the end of the summer and he did not. Fifteen years later, I handled things much differently. I was in a meeting with a group of lawyers, including the chairman of a large NYC firm. We were all colleagues, and my multidiverse background was well known. The chairman began by suggesting that someone take notes and he turned to me, handed me a pad and asked if I would do that. I took the pad, gave him a dazzling smile and said in a loud voice, “We are not going to have the only minority in the room act as secretary.” I promptly turned to the man next to me, handed him the pad and said, “John, let’s see how good your shorthand is.” Everyone laughed, my point was made and we moved along. Being direct, confident and using humor has been an effective way for me to handle the implicit bias that still crops up on a regular basis.

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

A: Be confident and comfortable with who you are. If you are OK with yourself and you project that, others will respond in kind. It is much harder to discriminate against a positive, confident person than against someone who projects insecurity or discomfort. Do everything you can to build your confidence — take training opportunities to develop your skills (hard and soft), seek out mentors to help you learn the things that they do not teach you in law school, find that power outfit that makes you feel polished and sharp and that you will wear like armor in your most intimidating circumstances, take a public speaking class ... do whatever it takes to feel good about yourself.

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

A: Firms have two basic models for increasing partner diversity — hire and develop diverse associates from the ground up or seek out minority partners to hire laterally. I believe the key to success in either strategy is the same: a strong system of support and career management. Diverse attorneys are no different than any other lawyers. They want training, good work, mentoring, feedback and career guidance. Part of effectively providing these things to attorneys of color means being willing to acknowledge and talk about their diversity, with them and with the rest of the firm, in a frank and positive way.

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the firm, its clients, or Portfolio Media Inc., or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.
