

Workplace Diversity: Who is Championing African-American Professional Women In The Workplace?



Dionysia Johnson-Massie

Dionysia Johnson-Massie is a veteran litigator and shareholder at Littler Mendelson, P.C., the largest labor and employment law firm in the country exclusively representing national and international employers. Johnson-Massie may be reached at 404.760.3901 or djmassie@littler.com.

There is something compelling about listening to women — particularly African-American professional women — discuss their experiences in the workplace. No matter the industry, smart, capable and driven African-American professional women are facing unique challenges. The fundamental issue is whether corporate cultures are requiring managers to develop the skills necessary for championing talented African-American professional women in the workplace. Requirements drive outcomes.

In the current business environment where it is critical to have employees and executives who possess a broad range of skills to advance a company's business objectives, effectively mining top talent is a market-place distinguisher. Employers who tolerate workplace cultures requiring talented African-American women professionals to spend time "fighting" internally (which devalues their talents) miss the "big picture." Namely, inequitable workplace cultures interfere with an employee's ability to be more brilliant, creative, and revenue-enhancing, and divert attention away from delivering on critical business objectives.

Some suggestions for championing African-American professional women in the workplace include:

- Assessing what actions managers have engaged in to champion the careers of others in the workplace. Determine whether those same actions have been applied to champion the careers of African-American professional women. If not, look at current career-enhancing project opportunities and provide one to a talented African-American professional woman to deliver. Doing so will allow her to expand her skill set and ultimately advance.
- Determining what conduct or personal behaviors interfere with your ability to champion the career of African-American professional women.

As with any skill required to drive business outcomes, discontinue conduct that does not create career-enhancing opportunities for talented African-American professional women. Such behavior undermines an employer's ultimate business objective: Retaining the talent necessary to increase market share and enhance brand value.

- Provide feedback regarding performance and "unwritten rules" to aid success. Every successful person can identify champions who helped them to navigate the many rules existing in the workplace. Champions are people who provide opportunities for you to expand your skill set, deliver feedback — even when unfavorable — so that you can improve, speak positively about your attributes, and actively position you for additional opportunities both openly and behind closed doors. Every manager should ask him or herself whether they are also championing talented African-American women in the workplace.
- Develop an action plan for championing the success of African-American professional women and effectively execute the plan. Resolve to outline upcoming projects, identify the skills needed to lead a project successfully, cultivate the skills of an African-American woman who could lead the project, and provide developmental feedback to help ensure success. It is a manager's responsibility to develop the skills of every person on his or her team. Evaluate your efforts, improve them each year, and detail the specific steps you took to aid a talented African-American woman on her path to success.

Action Item: Develop a plan to advance the career of a talented African-American woman today — and deliver on the goal — by year's end. **■**