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Director of Diversity and Engagement, O'Melveny & Myers LLP



What are three things you would tell an organization or leader to think about when hiring a Chief Diversity Officer?

I'm pleased that organizations of all types are hiring chief diversity officers to help them guide their operations in a more inclusive way. As they do so, I recommend that they look for someone who can be a change maker, a trusted advisor, and an innovator.

I hope organizations stay open to hiring diversity professionals who have worked in various industries. In the spirit of diversity, we can learn a lot from different perspectives, experiences, and skill-sets.

What are three ways to elevate the role of a diversity professional?

1. **An executive sponsor:** To be successful, diversity professionals need passionate, influential, forward-thinking senior leaders to work with. It may be the CEO, the Chair, or other senior leaders who are well-respected within the organization. A leader's gravitas can be indispensable as diversity professionals work to make meaningful change.
2. **Build relationships:** The more diversity professionals can work with and build their credibility with people at all levels across the organization, the more he or she can elevate their work within the organizations. It's important to give others a sense of ownership so that they can serve as champions for D&I. Diversity professionals must be as willing to roll up their sleeves, engage, and get the work done shoulder to shoulder with others, as they are to be thought leaders.
3. **Work with clients:** Some clients seek recommendations for DEI vendors and programs or advice as they build their diversity function. Others want to design shared diversity-related activities or discuss how we can work together to advance DEI goals in the legal industry. Successfully engaging with clients can extend the impact of diversity professionals' efforts. Partnering with clients also bolsters an organization's DEI reputation and helps diversity professionals garner respect inside and outside their organization.

If you were tasked with developing an initiative that would level the playing field for women and lawyers from underrepresented groups, how would you describe that initiative? What's the one thing that you think would have the most impact?

I don't think in terms of single initiatives, because the drive for greater diversity and inclusion is by its nature a holistic one. That said, one thing I remain focused on at our firm is our culture. I don't think there's any one magic initiative, but I do think there's magic in culture. And it has to evolve.

For example, in response to the recent tragedies in the Black community and to the challenges other demographic groups continue to face, cultures need to change, norms need to change. Finding those programs, behaviors, and standards in our organizations that need to be deconstructed, replaced, or eliminated is what I would focus on to level the playing field—quickly followed by actually implementing the necessary changes.

One of our diverse attorneys recently mused, “What would the firm be like if it was designed for attorneys like me?” I want everyone at the firm to feel as though the firm was designed for them.

Carlos Davila-Caballero

Director of Diversity and Inclusion, Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP



What are three things you would tell an organization or leader to think about when hiring a Chief Diversity Officer?

- **Culture:** Build strong consensus about the importance and value of a CDO. Companies providing professional services rely on its human capital/talent. The CDO promotes business success by recruiting, developing, and promoting diverse talent. For example, a company would not operate without a CFO or CIO for obvious competitive disadvantages, potential inefficiencies, and limitations on proper governance.
- **Structure:** Design or build the appropriate structural platform for the CDO to formulate strategy and achieve objectives. Consider an appropriate reporting structure; allocate significant resources (talent and budget).

- **Clarity:** Ensure stakeholders understand the role and objective the CDO is tasked to achieve. There is often opaqueness, variability, and/or understanding of what a CDO can, should, and must do. The clearer the role and objectives are, the more equipped the CDO will be to achieve cultural change.

What are three ways to elevate the role of a diversity professional?

1. **Access:** The CDO needs direct access to the Chairperson/Managing Partner/General Counsel and to key business information, with full mandate (support) to execute and implement DEI efforts, despite short term challenges and costs.
2. **Support:** Ensure proper internal support (human capital and budget) to drive DEI strategy and achieve desired DEI objectives.
3. **Work with clients:** Visible and continuous support from the Chairperson/Managing Partner is necessary for the CDO to provide expertise directly to leaders (executive committees, Board, key stakeholders).

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Compensation. Ensure that there is a mechanism to significantly increase equity partner compensation for those developing and elevating diverse and female lawyers to the equity partner level. It would be comparable to the origination level/tool used in the business development context. The partnership must be diversified in order to fully level the playing field. Partners still ultimately determine the quality/quantity of staffing, feedback, client access, review, and promotion of the talent pipeline. At 80% white/men levels, it is simply impossible to expect the system and business to yield different results.

Sylvia James

Director of Diversity and Inclusion, Winston & Strawn LLP



What are three things you would tell an organization or leader to think about when hiring a Chief Diversity Officer?

1. Strategic thinker.
2. Well-connected, well-networked, and well-respected.
3. Executive presence—particularly as it relates to communication skills. You need someone with the ability to deliver the tough news, who can communicate up and down the organization. And they also need to be able to get the confidence of the Chair, Managing Partner, CEO, Board, Management Committee, etc.

What are three ways to elevate the role of a diversity professional?

One of the things an organization can do is to show that diversity is important by elevating that DEI role to a chief position. Title and position matter—it sends a message to both internal and external stakeholders about the importance the firm places on that role.

Your Chief Diversity Officer also has to be a part of the decision-making. So often when you're a senior DEI professional, you have to fight to be included. You're held responsible for how the organization is doing, but you have no power because you have no voice in decision-making. To be successful you need to be able to sit with the hiring committee, the marketing team, with folks in charge of development and performance evaluations. Organizations need to be really intentional about where that person sits.

Make enhancing DEI one of the goals of the firm's strategic business plan. The professional who oversees helping the firm meet one of its core strategic business goals should then have the resources necessary to meet those goals—financial and human capital.

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Where I see the careers of minority associates being derailed is getting quality work and quality developmental feedback that lets you know where you can improve and what your strengths and weaknesses are.

Law firms are wedded to the free market system, and it's an assault on the culture to want to change that in any way, even when we know that it is destroying the careers of our minority lawyers, and in some instances, our women lawyers. If I had to pick the one thing that would make the biggest difference, it would be having the equal opportunity to get the skill-building, developmentally-rich billable work.

Melique Jones

*Director of Talent Pipeline and Diversity, Equity & Inclusion,
Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP*



What are three things you would tell an organization or leader to think about when hiring a Chief Diversity Officer?

One of the most important considerations for appointing a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) is positioning the person as a member of the senior management team, equivalent to the other key business and operational functions, and taking into account reporting lines, access to information, and affirmation that the CDO role is central to the organization's current and future business strategy, and therefore is resourced appropriately. Effective CDOs can be great connectors and ambassadors given the breadth of exposure and touchpoints they generate and attract with stakeholders who are internal—such as leaders, managers and rising talent—or external, such as clients and customers, potential recruits, alumni, vendors or industry organizations. Yet, if the role is set up as an adjunct function, the CDO will be out of the loop, and disconnected from the knowledge, insights and connections they need to provide influence that will help move the organization forward. Often when a diversity initiative fails or stalls, the blame shifts to the CDO's shortcomings, which very well might exist; but it likely is also because the organization took a passive, unimaginative approach to structuring the role and didn't position the CDO for success.

Another important consideration is resources, which I allude to above. An organization that is committed to moving diversity forward by hiring a CDO should do so only if it is prepared to invest in the person occupying the role and in the function. The considerations involve a sufficient budget, dedicated human capital support for the CDO, and a commitment of time by leaders within the organization to directly engage on these issues. The last point is important because improving diversity, equity, and inclusion is not a one-person show. Having the most qualified, rock star CDO doesn't relieve the rest of the organization's leadership of their responsibility in this area. In fact, a CDO will activate the rest of the leadership team. Bringing on a CDO should signal that leaders are ready to engage and be accountable for making progress.

In addition to the organizational mindset and readiness for a CDO, hiring the right person for the job is obviously essential. Particular qualifications for a CDO will vary based on industry, organizational culture, and where the firm or company is or is trying to get on its journey. However, there are a few universal qualifications that an organization should seek in a CDO. In my opinion, those include someone who is a subject matter expert, actively listens, embraces candid conversations, including on challenging topics, leads with empathy and courage, and thinks several steps ahead. A sense of humor also goes a long way at times.

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The lead DEI professional should report to a senior leader within the organization—ideally, the CEO, Firm Managing Partner, Chief Operating Officer, or equivalent role. Diversity used to be primarily a talent management or even compliance function, and it made sense that the lead DEI professional would report to the head of human resources or human capital management. However, the responsibilities under a DEI professional's purview are increasingly expansive, extending beyond HR. And if DEI is properly factored into an overall business or growth strategy, the professional leading the charge should report to a senior member of the C-suite.

Along those lines, a senior leader who visibly signals to the organization that the DEI professional has their imprimatur and support gives them standing to act and build relationships within the organization. This isn't a revolutionary concept; it's similar to what we know about promoting and elevating lawyers and other professionals – they need sponsors who will advocate for them, affirm their value and credibility, and provide opportunities. With many DEI professionals being members of underrepresented

communities (e.g., women, persons of color, LGBTQ+ and more), providing sponsorship for that person is critical.

Last, it's important to elevate the DEI professional's role by providing a platform for them to showcase their thought leadership, and engage in profile-raising opportunities within and outside the organization.

If you were tasked with developing an initiative that would level the playing field for women and lawyers from underrepresented groups, how would you describe that initiative? What's the one thing that you think would have the most impact?

Empathy is a game changer. The ability of lawyers to reach the highest levels often depends on their willingness to fit the "mold" and progression model established in the profession long ago when it was even more male-dominated and less racially and culturally diverse. The experiences of women, people of color and diverse professionals navigating in our organizations and society can differ in fundamental ways that presiding leaders and culture-carriers may not appreciate, or may not be curious about, because it is not their lived experience. Making perspective-taking more reciprocal in some meaningful, sustained way would create more empathic leadership, and shift the needle toward sustainable equity and inclusion.

At the same time, there's a direct way to level the playing field for women lawyers and lawyers of color: "Just do it." There is no shortage of exceptionally talented women attorneys and attorneys of color within our organizations. The keys are ensuring that the opportunities are shared equitably and recognizing that there doesn't need to be just one model at the top.

Don Smith

Chief Talent and Inclusion Officer, Crowell & Moring LLP



What are three things you would tell an organization or leader to think about when hiring a Chief Diversity Officer?

1. Require demonstrated success in the areas of strategic focus and in making improvements in diversity and inclusion goals—a proven track record of creating change.

2. Examine their strategic vision for how they would bring about change and ensure that it is a concrete plan and not just an impressive-sounding aspirational description of how change might come about. It's not just what you know, but how you plan to implement it.
3. Insist on creativity—*how* they would implement their strategic change. If it was easy or straightforward, the problem would have already been solved.

What are three ways to elevate the role of a diversity professional?

1. Incorporate them into the major functions of the firm, like recruiting, development, and talent management (both staff and attorney).
2. Bring them into major (and senior-level) conversations about the firm, even those that don't have a diversity component at face-value.
3. Value them among the upper echelon of your professional staff or your professional services support team. When your diversity professional is at the highest level, it shows your support both internally and externally. And provide them the resources and position to effectuate the change you hired them to bring about.

If you were tasked with developing an initiative that would level the playing field for women and lawyers from underrepresented groups, how would you describe that initiative? What's the one thing that you think would have the most impact?

Simply, I would hire and promote more people from diverse backgrounds. I think these matters tend to be over-complicated. I totally understand why, but approaching diversity as a business imperative and just doing it—making some courageous decisions—rather than just talking it and hoping it happens, will make all the difference.

Yusuf Zakir

*Incoming Chief Diversity & Inclusion Officer, Davis Wright
Tremaine LLP*



What are three things you would tell an organization or leader to think about when hiring a Chief Diversity Officer?

Courage, compassion, and candor—anyone in this role needs to lead with all three.

This work requires courage because you're often working against the status quo and the "way it has always been done"—you need to be bold in pushing for real and meaningful change.

At the same time you need to be compassionate. Putting in the effort to understand the experiences of others is critical. This work is often intertwined with personal identity and it is important to always be aware of that. Inclusion, at its core, is empathy.

With courage and compassion, you also need to be able to speak your truth, be willing to call things out when they're wrong, be brave and clear in what you say—and to be truthful, often in difficult circumstances.

What are three ways to elevate the role of a diversity professional?

1. The role should have seniority within the organization—ideally it should be a role that works with senior leadership. Not only is it important to have a seat at the table to help with decision-making and strategic priorities, but it's also optically important. It demonstrates the value of DEI and where it sits within the organization.
2. The role should be well-integrated into the organization. We all know that DEI does not happen in a silo. To be successful, integration into the verticals of an organization is required. But that most effectively occurs when the leadership in an organization proactively calls for and supports that integration.
3. The role should be given the appropriate platform to do the work. DEI efforts still tend to be under-resourced. Any organization should think critically about what it expects its diversity professional to accomplish, whether the resources can support those expectations, and help close any resource gaps when they may exist.

If you were tasked with developing an initiative that would level the playing field for women and lawyers from underrepresented groups, how would you describe that initiative? What's the one thing that you think would have the most impact?

Sometimes we forget the simplicity of it, but I think that sponsorship is an important key. At the end of the day, our objective is to address the challenges of access to work opportunities, leadership, social capital, and information, as well as providing room to grow and room to fail. Having a senior leader in the organization who is advocating for you, introducing you to opportunities, and getting you visibility—that addresses those challenges. Of course, it takes a meaningful investment of time from both the sponsors and the protégés. But if we're ever going to see the change we want to see in advancing under-represented talent, we have to create those relationships, because they already organically occur for our majority populations. We need to create an equitable playing field.



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