



INSIGHT

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Women in law: Representation, sponsorship and inclusivity in creating pathways for progression

Throughout my legal career, I have found myself working in teams made up almost entirely of men. In many ways, that has become a familiar part of my professional experience. It was only when this was pointed out to me that I began to reflect more consciously on the significance of being one of very few women, and one of very few black women, in those spaces.

For many women entering traditionally male dominated professions, that awareness is immediate. You become conscious of being different, and of what that may mean for how you see yourself and the path ahead. Representation matters because it shapes how people see themselves, the opportunities they believe are available to them, and what they imagine is possible. The absence of representation can have an equally powerful effect. When people don't see themselves reflected in positions of influence, it can quietly influence their sense of what is achievable – sometimes before they've even had the opportunity to participate.

To me, representation is not simply about who occupies a particular position. It's about visibility, and the broader impact that visibility has; who is seen as belonging, whose experiences are understood, and whose perspectives are considered when decisions are made and cultures are shaped.

One example that brought this into sharper focus for me was when I joined Webber Wentzel. Seeing senior professionals wear their natural hair openly while occupying positions of influence was significant because it shaped my early understanding of the culture I was entering. In a profession with a long-standing reputation of tradition and formality, it demonstrated that there is more than one way to embody professionalism, leadership and success. In doing so, it gave me permission to broaden my own understanding of what belonging could look like, and what I could achieve within the profession.

Six years on, I don't think twice about wearing my natural hair out, and I rarely receive a second look when I do. That small shift reflects something much broader: the way that representation and visibility can shape culture.

While this is an example of the visible impact of representation, its influence extends beyond what we see. Representation also shapes the conversations that happen behind closed doors; influencing perspectives, informing decisions, and contributing to the cultures and practices that determine how organisations evolve.

This is particularly important in professions such as M&A, where careers are often shaped by exposure, relationships and access. Seeing women succeed in these spaces can create a sense of

possibility for those who follow, while women who progress into positions of influence can help shape the cultures, decisions and practices that create more inclusive pathways for future talent. In this way, progress becomes self-reinforcing.

The role of sponsorship in creating pathways for progression

Seeing people succeed in spaces where you aspire to be can broaden your understanding of what is possible. But turning that possibility into reality often depends on the people who are willing to invest in your development, advocate for your growth, and create opportunities for you to progress.

A significant part of my own journey through the legal profession has been the privilege of having senior professionals who have challenged me, supported me, and advocated for my development. I have been fortunate to have had sponsors such as Jimmy Mkhabela and Leslie de Bruyn, who have played an important role in my professional growth within the firm.

What I have valued most about those relationships is not only the support they have provided, but the way they've challenged me to grow. They have reinforced for me the importance of leaders' generosity with their time, guidance and support, and leaders who hold people to a high standard, push them to be better and, when they succeed, champion their achievements and ensure that others recognise them. That kind of sponsorship, whether formal or informal, can be transformative.

I recognise that I speak from a position of privilege. Access to this kind of support is not always equal, and even where sponsorship structures are intentionally created, their effectiveness largely depends on leaders who are willing to identify talent, invest in their development, and use their influence to create opportunities for people who may not otherwise have access to those networks.

This is particularly important in the legal profession. Progress is not only about creating access to the profession; it is about creating the conditions for women to succeed once they are there.

The importance of diversity of thought and experience in leadership

Leadership matters because leaders shape the culture, expectations and opportunities within an organisation. A broader range of perspectives strengthens decision-making by challenging assumptions, identifying blind spots, and bringing greater insight to the experiences that shape people's careers. For women in M&A, this is particularly important because diverse leadership can help identify the barriers and experiences that influence whether talented women are able to remain, progress and thrive within the profession. 

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