

## Diversity Is Good for Business



**Ben Wilson**  
Beveridge & Diamond PC



**Kenneth P. Williams**  
Segal McCambridge

Ben Wilson of Beveridge & Diamond PC and Kenneth P. Williams of Segal McCambridge are examples of something far too rare in corporate law firms: black partners with substantial books of business. Mr. Wilson is known throughout the legal community for his work in diversity. He is a board member on the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity and is the facilitator for the more than 6,000 members of the Diverse Partners Network.\* Mr. Williams serves as Chair for Segal McCambridge's Diversity and Inclusion Committee. Not surprisingly, both of their law firms have African-American attorney percentages well above the three percent average.

Beveridge & Diamond is one of the leading environmental law practices in the United States; however, it is still unusual for a boutique firm to have three black partners. This is undoubtedly due to Mr. Wilson's support. "I show black attorneys how to build a practice." Mr. Wilson does this for other attorneys as well, particularly women.

"Law firms have to help people who don't look like us," said Mr. Wilson who credits women in-house counsel with helping him build a book of business, and that business is key.

"Having the work matters," said Mr. Wilson who was managing partner for 9 years before being elected the firm's first chairman three years ago.

"For many firms, diversity is for a season," said Mr. Wilson, but it is impossible to succeed at it with that approach. We have to be intentional about diversity the way we are intentional about delivering an uncommon level of client service."

"Recently, we hired a female associate of color in our Seattle office. We identified her through our networking channels," said Mr. Wilson who regularly speaks to BLSA groups and has taught an environmental justice course at Howard Law School for thirteen years.

"I probably meet with several individuals every week. I try to provide encouragement. I share lists of people I know. The worst thing that happens is we become friends, and the only thing I ask in return is that, when they are able to do so, they help someone else," said Mr. Wilson.

According to Mr. Williams, recruiting and hiring black attorneys is one part of the job; retaining them is a whole separate hurdle. "At my previous firm, I hired an associate who wasn't fluent with the English language, despite having gone to law school and passing the bar. She struggled with writing and verbal communication," said Mr. Williams. "Even her peer attorneys would mildly criticize her. I committed to mentoring her, and she was able to progress into a successful attorney. She later moved to

Toronto, Canada, and became a Barrister. I'm very proud of the role I played in her journey. I am proud to have helped her grow both as an attorney and as an individual. I created an environment that helped her develop professionally and not become discouraged." This benefits both the associate and the firm.

Mr. Williams believes that "the inclusion side of diversity requires giving individuals the confidence to participate and feel included despite personal and professional imperfections." Too often firms are impatient with people who are different. "I focus on developing an associate's confidence first. Change within an attorney's practice follows suit. I think that's how you groom any person," said Mr. Williams.

Mr. Williams was the only minority attorney at his previous firm. Though his experience there was positive, he feared that the lack of diversity would cost the firm business down the road. "For a firm that is interested in growing, embracing the future, and having a diverse client base, you need diverse counsel," explained Mr. Williams. He recognizes that his insurance litigation practice adjusters at insurance companies aren't homogenous and their insurers embody the diversity seen throughout the country.

Clients want their vendors to have a range of representation along with perspective and institutional knowledge about themselves and their customers. Firms without diverse representation will have a difficult time competing with their peers.

Mr. Williams also believes diverse attorneys have a role to play in their own success and added, "Cognitive bias can be used to discriminate based on ignorance. It can also be used to over-assume causing someone to miss out on opportunities."

"Over time a litigator learns to gage a jury's reaction to himself," said Mr. Williams who recalled trying a case in an unfamiliar county where he was the only person of color in the courtroom. However, he never felt that anyone was treating him differently because of his race. "I think this stems from my choice to not approach a situation like this with cognitive bias towards a group of people I've never met. And so, it goes both ways."

Both Mr. Wilson and Mr. Williams understand the frustration and discouragement with the low percentages of black attorneys; but both attorneys are committed to changing the culture that will see these numbers grow. Mr. Wilson recalls a quote by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: *You don't have to see the whole staircase to take the first step.*

---

\* If you'd like to receive the Diverse Partners Network newsletter, email Mr. Wilson at [BWilson@bdlaw.com](mailto:BWilson@bdlaw.com) and include the request in the subject line.