



LOOKING BACK; MOVING FORWARD

Career Transitions as a Woman of Color

By *Hon. Risé Jones Pichon (Ret.)*

Looking back on two career changes over my 40-plus-year career, it would seem the second should be easier than the first—easier in the sense that my background and experience should have stood on their own.

After all, I had built a striking resume, developed a wide variety of skills, and garnered glowing accolades. With all of the successes and advances by women of color in the legal field, society's views on their abilities and competence have most certainly evolved.

Plus, we have learned from our own experiences and have taken to heart those valuable lessons. So, it would seem that each transition should be easier to navigate than the one preceding it.

But effecting change in deeply rooted attitudes and beliefs, and moving beyond the status quo to bring about meaningful long-lasting policies and practices, takes time. And I have learned that true change occurs at a much slower pace in the field of law. Past successes do not guarantee a painless transition to a new role within our profession.

I began my legal career working as an attorney in two county government agencies. After six years, I transitioned to the bench as a court commissioner, and then to the municipal court and the superior court. In each of these positions, there were very few, if any, other women of color. Following my retirement from the bench, I began working as a mediator and arbitrator with JAMS.

Women of color have come a long way, but not far enough. Former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor is often quoted for



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her remarks regarding her graduation from law school and the challenges she faced in her search for employment. She stated that employment in corporate and large law firms was not an option for women when she graduated from law school. However, it was possible to find employment within government agencies. I came along nearly 25 years later, in the 1970s, and my experience was pretty much the same.

I wanted to work as a lawyer. After all, I attended law school so that I could practice law. I was pleased and proud to work for the government, and I put my heart and soul into my work. I began my career in the Office of the Public Defender and later moved to the Office of the County Counsel in San Jose, California. At each office, there were no other African-American women attorneys.

Having joined the ranks of mediators and arbitrators, I find that there is a paucity of women of color in this field as well. This is not surprising, as mediators and arbitrators come to the alternative dispute resolution field after having served for decades as attorneys and judges. The pool of candidates is limited by the number of women of color who graduated from law school in the 1970s and 1980s. The pathway to success involves many of the same challenges that existed when I first entered the profession.

To this day, women of color continue to be underrepresented in the legal profession and continue to face challenges to gain admission into large law firms and corporations. Once admitted, even those with exemplary qualifications may still face questions regarding competence.

These attitudes persist despite the demise of affirmative action programs from the 1960s and 1970s, when government agencies and private-sector companies sought to hire people of color. Many assumed that those hired under this program were patently unqualified. This belief made us work even harder, and we continue to do so. Our confidence in our abilities is repeatedly challenged by skepticism; thus, we bear the burden of

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having to prove ourselves anew with each position we accept.

This has forced us to never let our guard down and to always strive for perfection so that our collective performance will reflect well on those who follow, as our predecessors have done for us. As more women of color begin careers in the legal field, it will become increasingly easier for them to move about the legal profession without having their qualifications and skills unduly scrutinized and without having to constantly prove their worth and value.

In the meantime, the need to work harder and to prove ourselves remains. We must share with each other our experiences and suggestions. With that in mind, I humbly offer my suggestions (which have worked well for me):

1. **Find an all-purpose mentor;** one who is not necessarily in your place of employment or even your field. This should be someone you can go to for advice on any issue, such as work, family, life in general, or just for moral support. It should also be someone you feel you can safely confide in without fear of judgment or criticism, and who can have no negative effect on your employment relationships or evaluations.
2. **Find a mentor within your place of employment.** This should be someone who will give you guidance regarding the company's expectations and culture, someone with extensive experience within the firm or agency who is in a position of authority, and

someone who will support you and alert you to potential roadblocks that you are unable to foresee. Understand that mentors will not necessarily come looking for you. Schedule times to meet that work for both of you and strive to keep them.

3. **Hold yourself to the highest standards and give excellent service.** This may mean having to work harder than your colleagues, but it is essential. Concentrating on your responsibilities is crucial. It is not necessary to figure out everyone's motives. This is one reason to seek out a mentor, so that you can focus on your relationships with others, and your performance. Recognition will come later, so until then, do your work and ensure an excellent product.
4. **Don't be afraid.** You must face your fears and keep moving ahead. You must have the courage to put yourself out there and endure the scrutiny. If you allow doubt to control you, you will limit your successes. Fear is a part of life. It comes and it goes. Acknowledge it but keep moving forward.
5. **Lastly, weigh your responses carefully.** There will be many hurt feelings from snubs, challenges to your authority, and disrespectful acts. Think about whether these slights warrant filing a formal complaint. Look for the hidden lessons and learn from them. Don't lose sight of your goals, and remember your support system: your friends, family, and mentors.

The road to achieving equality is a long one, and for women of color, it will continue to be a challenging one. Just think how much more difficult it was for our mothers, grandmothers, and the other trailblazing women who made our achievements possible. We must acknowledge, and be grateful to, the women of color who preceded us, and whose paths were so much more difficult, for they have given us the courage to dream and the inspiration to dare to accomplish our dreams. ■