

A Chat With Ballard Spahr Diversity Chief Virginia Essandoh

By *Carlos Pauling*

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In this [monthly series](#), legal recruiting experts from [Major Lindsey & Africa](#) interview law firm management from Am Law 200 firms and other industry leaders about how they navigate an increasingly competitive business environment. In the final part of this series, Carlos Pauling talks with [Virginia G. Essandoh](#), chief diversity officer at [Ballard Spahr LLP](#). Essandoh began her career with [Altman Weil Inc.](#) as a consultant where she advised law firms and legal agencies on diversity and gender initiatives and strategic planning. In 2008, she joined Ballard Spahr as the second director of diversity. In 2011, Essandoh was promoted to CDO and named to the firm's management committee and expanded board.



Q: What are the greatest challenges you face as chief diversity officer?

A: Our clients have embraced diversity and inclusion and advocate for both to be prioritized in the law firms they hire. But sometimes, they don't hold us accountable. They will ask us questions about our diversity and inclusion efforts but not necessarily follow through by holding us to account for our answers. If we respond that we have drastically improved over the last few years and we submit that answer but receive no feedback, that is not holding us accountable. If we submit an answer that reflects a less diverse team and don't hear about it from the client, that, again, is not holding us accountable.

There are many clients that do follow up and reward their law firms for building more diverse and inclusive teams. Because we truly believe that diverse perspectives enhance our collective capabilities, we will always strive to recruit and retain lawyers from diverse backgrounds. But when clients insist that we do, it only strengthens our resolve. Just as the power of that demand is a great asset in the fight for advancing diversity in law, the absence of it can be a great challenge.

Q: How has increased public attention on diversity in the workplace impacted

your work as chief diversity officer?

A: The increased public attention on diversity in the workplace often encourages us to shift our attention and priorities to address the newest ways we can advance diversity and inclusion. Some of these calls to action and approaches appear to be fleeting, but others, such as the Mansfield certification and the organizations like the [Leadership Council on Legal Diversity](#), have true staying power. Diversity work is never stagnant. As environments change and improve, the needs evolve and we have to find new ways of meeting them. The public attention, coupled with these initiatives and organizations, provide inspiration and direction for firms like ours, which are always looking for the next and best ways to move forward.

Q: What is the best way for law firms to identify and define their strengths in a meaningful and actionable way?

A: You have to look at who is in the partnership and management of the firm. Ultimately, you want to see women and diverse lawyers advancing to the highest levels of leadership. This is the best and truest gauge of a firm's strengths with regard to diversity and inclusion.

Law firms must assess who is making partner and, just as important, who are the gatekeepers to the partnership. Partners should be considering a partnership candidate's commitment to creating a diverse and inclusive firm when voting on who will join them. And firm leaders should be appointing to leadership roles those lawyers who are dedicated advancing diversity and inclusion at all levels.

Q: When it comes to diversity, how do you correct inequities at the firm level when the problems you are addressing are systemic and much larger than a single firm?

A: It will always start with the pipeline. We have to reach diverse students when they're in middle school and high school and keep engaging them through college and law school. And once they've earned their JDs, we have to continue to include and support them all the way through to partnership.

When it comes to inequities in the legal industry, we're covering all fronts all day, every day. We have to address the macro and the micro: both the systemic processes as well as the day-to-day interactions among people. We ask ourselves how our strategies affect every level of our processes. How do they address the work assignment system? Who gets an interview or a callback? And if we see a failure to consider diversity and inclusion, we put in measures and systems that address those failures and the inequities they bring with them.

Q: To create a safe environment, to have honest discourse, it stems from the

leaders of the firm. How are your leaders held accountable for their role in diversity?

A: The first step is to figure out how to encourage leaders to be approachable enough so that others in the firm feel that they can come to leadership with concerns and ideas for improvement. We strive to create culturally competent leaders by fostering an environment where leaders can acknowledge the areas, especially when it comes to diversity, where they are less knowledgeable and less experienced. Creating a nonthreatening and accepting environment is the necessary first step to discovering shortcomings and working collaboratively to address them. When people are open and honest about what they are trying to do and what they are struggling to do, that makes them more accountable.

Q: Describe one of your greatest accomplishments in your current role.

A: I truly feel that Ballard is a better place because of the work we have been doing around diversity and inclusion. Ten years ago, 11% of associates were lawyers of color. Today, it is 24%. Women were 10% of the board, and there were no lawyers of color. As of July 1, women will represent 40% of the board, which is inclusive of partners of color. Ten years ago, our major legal practice areas were led exclusively by white men. Today, 40% are led by women and partners of color. As of July 1, 66% of our newly elected partners will be women, including women of color.

This year's summer associate class is 65% diverse, including 54% people of color. It follows now a pattern of beautifully diverse summer classes. The language of diversity and inclusion is more commonly spoken by firm leaders and the value of it is readily acknowledged by partners and lawyers. Of course, none of these successes happen without the leadership of our chair, Mark Stewart.

We've come a long way and still have much more to do. But our dramatic progress just in the last decade shows that, with the right support and dedication from leadership, equity in the legal profession is possible.

Q: What does leadership mean to you?

A: Leadership is being able to stand by your mission and not waiver when the policies enacted to advance that mission are unpopular or make people uncomfortable. Leadership is living the values of the mission.

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