

Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Shearman's Claudius Sokenu

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Claudius O. Sokenu is a partner in Shearman & Sterling's New York, Washington, D.C., and London offices. Before private practice, he was a senior counsel with the Enforcement Division of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission in Washington. His practice focuses on representing financial institutions, public and private companies, accounting firms, and their boards of directors, audit committees, officers and employees in securities enforcement actions, class action litigation, white collar criminal defense, internal investigations, congressional investigations, and complex commercial litigation in state and federal courts. Sokenu also has experience in handling high-profile matters requiring concurrent representation in the civil, criminal and political spheres.



Claudius O. Sokenu

Sokenu has been ranked by Chambers USA and Chambers Global for his investigative, regulatory and securities enforcement practice, by Benchmark Litigation as a Litigation Star, named a "Rising Star" by Ethisphere, recognized by Securities Law360 as one of its 10 under 40, named by Main Justice as one of the Best FCPA Lawyers Outside the Beltway, and named a "Top Lawyer" by The Network Journal. He has represented some of the world's largest corporations and/or certain of their senior officers, executives and boards, including Allianz SE, Bank of New York, CIBC World Markets, Jefferies & Co., GlaxoSmithKline, Bank of America, Ernst & Young, Avon Products, CVS Caremark, Arthur Andersen LLP, Amgen, Wal-Mart, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Kraft Foods, Embraer, Cardinal Health and TV Azteca.

As a participant in Law360's Minority Powerbrokers Q&A series, Sokenu shared his perspective on five questions:

Q: How did you break the glass ceiling in the legal industry?

A: My road to partnership epitomizes the old adage "it takes a village." While I was studying for my law degree in England, I found myself often fascinated by the U.S. financial markets and the intersection of law and finance. That led to the conclusion that Wall Street and not London was where I wanted to practice law. With no idea whatsoever about how to accomplish this grand ambition, I set about emigrating to the United States and enrolled in Georgetown University Law Center's LLM program in

Securities and Financial Regulations.

From the moment I arrived on these shores, I have been extremely fortunate to be mentored by many lawyers who saw in me something worth investing in and, for that, I will be forever grateful. From the late Arthur Matthews, a then-adjunct professor of securities law at Georgetown University Law Center and a partner at Wilmer Cutler & Pickering, who guided me to the Enforcement Division of the SEC, to Richard Walker, general counsel of Deutsche Bank AG, and Steve Cutler, JP Morgan Chase's general counsel, both of whom I worked for on a number of high-profile investigations and enforcement actions at the SEC as a young impressionable lawyer.

After leaving the SEC, I joined Mayer Brown's New York office where Hector Gonzalez, now of Dechert, and Steve Wolowitz both worked tirelessly to develop me as a lawyer and give me opportunities to hone my skills. Without the mentoring and opportunities provided to me by my mentors, it is highly doubtful that I would have made it this far. Indeed, it was at the suggestion of one of my Mayer Brown mentors, Z. Scott at Kaye Scholer, that the Obama administration interviewed me for the position of principal deputy general counsel for the Treasury Department. While I did not join the administration, I continue to be committed to public service.

Today, I have a strong inner circle of mentors and confidants, including Kim Rucker, general counsel of Kraft Foods, Michele Coleman Mayes, general counsel of The New York Public Library, Ted Wells, senior partner at Paul Weiss Rifkind Wharton & Garrison, Don Liu, general counsel of Xerox Corporation, and Andrea Jung, president and CEO of Grameen America.

While I am confident that the glass ceiling in the legal profession is not broken, I am hopeful that I have added another crack to it and that, in my lifetime, it will be completely shattered.

Q: What are the challenges of being a lawyer of color at a senior level?

A: Access is perhaps one of the more debilitating challenges that a senior lawyer of color faces. Access to long-standing institutional clients and other important firm relationships can often, intentionally or otherwise, be denied to partners of color. Without these relationships, a partner's ability to develop a practice can be seriously hampered. Since there is often some correlation between a partner's practice and a seat at the table of power, partners of color often tend not to be invited to join those committees where key decisions are made. Importantly, partners of color are increasingly finding ways to build relationships based, at least in part, on their own network of contacts and corporate America's understanding that a diverse legal team is far more likely to better serve its legal needs.

Another important challenge is mentoring the next generation of minority lawyers. With fewer and fewer minorities going to law school and even fewer making it through to the major firms, recruitment, retention and mentoring of the next generation is critical. Given the guidance and mentoring that I received as a young lawyer, I consider it among my most important tasks to seek out and mentor young diverse lawyers regardless of firm. It is for this reason that I joined the faculty of Georgetown University Law Center as an adjunct professor teaching securities enforcement.

Q: Describe a time you encountered discrimination in your career and tell us how you handled it.

A: As a young partner in a prior firm, I was engaged by a new client to manage a highly visible bet-the-farm litigation. Early on in the engagement, a powerful senior partner with whom I had a good working relationship visited me and said that I needed to put an older partner on the team because the board of

directors of the client may not be comfortable working with a young black partner. After days of deliberation, I visited this senior partner in his office and politely explained to him how his comments came across. Even though he never actually apologized or acknowledged that his comments were potentially racially insensitive, I noticed a positive change in the way he interacted with me and other lawyers of color at the firm. In that circumstance, engaging and educating elicited a positive reaction.

Q: What advice would you give to a lawyer of color?

A: I would highlight four guiding principles. First, do what you love. All too often, young lawyers have no interest in practicing law and are just marking time. Spending 12 hours every day (or at least five days a week) doing something that you are not happy doing can be rather draining and demoralizing. Second, assuming a sustained interest in practicing law, young associates should hone their legal skills. Through mentors and other firm resources, determine where you need to be in terms of skills: If, like me, you are a litigator and you are not writing briefs, taking depositions and standing up in court as a mid- to senior-level associate, you may be falling short. Third, regardless of color, seek out mentors who will invest in you at your firm and elsewhere. Success is far less likely without mentors who are invested in your success. Fourth, get involved in firm matters and be a visible firm citizen.

Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase diversity in its partner ranks?

A: Firm leadership must openly and consistently commit to true diversity for it to have a serious chance of success. Some call this tone at the top. Absent that, I am afraid no amount of glossy diversity brochures and dedicated websites will solve the dearth of lawyers of color at law firms. Substantial effort and resources must be committed to recruitment, retention and promotion of diverse candidates. It sends a message when there are no diverse lawyers in firm management and other leadership positions. From my own experience, it was impactful when I became the first black male partner at Shearman & Sterling.

Moreover, clients are also increasingly demanding to see a diverse bench when they hire outside counsel. Whatever the motivation, investing in the recruitment, retention and promotion of diverse candidates is a societal good and a business imperative.

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