Alone at the Top

Diversity initiatives are slow to reach firms’ highest positions

By Tony Flesor

While many law firms are taking action on promoting diversity, firms in Denver are lagging when it comes to electing minority attorneys to managing partner positions or leadership positions.

In March, Gordon Rees Scully & Mansukhani elected Franz Hardy co-managing partner of the firm’s Denver office. And as John Palmieri, his counterpart in the position, suspected, Hardy is the only minority managing partner of a mid-size or larger firm in Denver — counting those with more than 20 attorneys or roughly the top 50 firms on Law Week’s Colorado 200 list. According to Hardy, that distinction is more a sign of entrenched ideologies rather than a personal accolade.

“My take is there’s a sense of tradition that continues and an attitude that firms have been relatively successful without having to make forward-thinking changes,” Hardy said. “The other side of that coin is that law firms have not had a catalyst for change, whether internally or externally through client or industry pressure, to require firms to think about changes within their leadership.”

In Denver, many of the minority attorneys who are making decisions at their firms have also started those changes within their firms. And as John Palmeri, his counterpart in the position, suspected, Hardy is the only minority managing partner of a mid-size or larger firm in Denver — counting those with more than 20 attorneys or roughly the top 50 firms on Law Week’s Colorado 200 list. According to Hardy, that distinction is more a sign of entrenched ideologies rather than a personal accolade.

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Hardy is not just lonely at the top in being managing partner of a local firm, but firms with 50 or more attorneys are more inclined to be attracted to that firm because they believe they’ll have a better chance to climb the ladder there if they don’t have to be a trailblazer,” she told Law Week. “Many [female leaders] also make a point of personally reaching out to younger female attorneys to serve as mentors.”

That point marks the importance of Hardy’s recent promotion. He said improving diversity in the profession requires firms to provide opportunities to minority attorneys and also for a change in how leaders think about diversity. For instance, he makes a distinction between young attorneys having a mentor versus a coach.

“The term mentor — and even sponsor — is ambiguous. It has different meanings dependent on the person and the relationship,” Hardy said. “Coach has a more concrete definition for most people. A coach isn’t passive, a coach is someone whose job it is to find strengths and help you with your weaknesses and come up with a plan to maximize your skillset and help find a path to success.” That distinction is essential in identifying ways to improve diversity in the profession.

Those ideas of working with young attorneys to create opportunities are especially important when there aren’t enough attorneys to create opportunities are especially important when there aren’t enough attorneys to create opportunities are especially important when there aren’t enough attorneys to create opportunities are especially important when there aren’t enough attorneys to create opportunities are especially important when there aren’t enough attorneys to create opportunities are especially important when there aren’t enough attorneys to create opportunities are especially important when there aren’t enough attorneys to create opportunities.