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In Hindsight, 20/20 Diversity Is Too Low for Asian-American GCs

Asian-American lawyers make gains in general counsel ranks. It's not by accident.

By Vivia Chen | February 02, 2018

In 2015, Wilson Chu and Don Liu, two pillars of the Asian-American bar, cooked up an audacious challenge: Put 20 Asian-Americans in the general counsel seat of Fortune 500 companies by the year 2020.

“When Don and I thought of this initiative, we didn’t think we could make it,” says Chu, a partner at McDermott Will & Emery.



Left to right: Don Liu, Caroline Tsai, and Wilson Chu.

It turns out they are way ahead of schedule: Last December, Caroline Tsai became the new GC of Western Union, fulfilling the 20/20 challenge. Now, Chu is chirping a different tune: "By the first quarter of 2018, we could be 23. Maybe we should shoot for 40 by 2020!"

Chu has reason to be cocky. Asian-American lawyers reached two other milestones last year: Lawrence Tu, chief legal officer of CBS Corp., catapulted to the 10 highest-paid GCs list. And in the Bay Area, there are now more than 100 Asian-American GCs (six years ago, there were only 30).

For a group that's been saddled with a worker bee (read: nerdy) image, Asian-Americans seem to be an overnight sensation. Why are they suddenly popping up in high-profile positions in Corporate America? Have they finally arrived?

"Just because we hit 20/20 doesn't mean we are ready to declare victory," Liu warns. The GC of Target, Liu adds that Asian-Americans are still scarce in the top ranks of the legal profession. (Though Asian-Americans have been the largest minority group at major firms for the last 20 years, they represent just over 3 percent of Big Law partners and 3 percent of GCs in the Fortune 500 and 100.)

While Asian-American lawyers are buoyed about the recent gains, they say that none of it happened by accident. "There's been a concerted effort on the part of NAPABA [National Asian Pacific American Bar Association] and MCCA [Minority Corporate Counsel Association] to prepare people for these positions," says John Kuo, GC of Varian Medical Systems.

One such preparation is the annual NAPABA summit, a two-and-a-half-day boot camp for about a hundred high-potential GC prospects (a.k.a. "the pipeliners"), run by Chu, Liu and Jean Lee of MCCA. Beside awesome networking opportunities with Fortune 1000 GC and key headhunters, pipeliners get drilled on what's really critical for success: people skills.

Indeed, Liu minces no words about what he thinks holds back Asian-Americans: “To me, APAs [Asian Pacific Americans] are lacking in soft skills.” To address that issue, Liu says, “we brought in experts to teach public speaking and executive presence, and the GCs themselves talk about soft skills at the summit. We are addressing it in an organized way.”

One alumna is Western Union’s Tsai. Gregarious and energetic, Tsai hardly seems to need lessons in soft skills. Yet Tsai says the summit made a big difference in her career. “I applied the lessons from the GC—practical and strategic advice—every day,” she says, adding that the summit gave her access to “amazing GC mentors.” (Tsai’s main mentor was Ivan Fong, GC of 3M.)

Linda Lu, who heads the legal team at Nationwide Insurance Co.’s personal lines division, is a blunt-talking litigator, but she says that Asian-Americans often have trouble blowing their own horns. What the NAPABA training offers, she says, “is a safe space for APAs to practice their soft skills and excel.”

Will Asian-American success in-house spill over to Big Law, where Asian-Americans have the lowest conversion rate of associates to partners? “GCs drive change,” Kuo says. “If you’re a managing partner of a firm and you have a diverse GC sitting in front of you, you’ll realize it’s time to present a diverse team.”

Lu isn’t so patient. Asian-American lawyers in companies, she says, shouldn’t be so wimpy about helping each other: “We should use the spike in APA general counsel as a call to action to drive a similar spike in law firms. We need the courage to hire high-performing APA lawyers ourselves.”

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