



AN UNLIKELY MENTOR AND UNEXPECTED RESULTS

BY JENNIE PHILIP

I was recently very fortunate to score tickets to the Broadway hit “Hamilton” and found that it lived up to all of the hype and critical acclaim. What stood out for me was the implausible relationship that developed between Alexander Hamilton and George Washington. They were an unlikely duo. Washington was the son of a wealthy plantation owner, a surveyor of the Virginia lands, commander-in-chief of the Continental Army and our nation’s first president. Hamilton, on the other hand, was born out of wedlock in Charlestown, Nevis, British Virgin Islands. He was orphaned and too poor to afford any regular schooling. Despite this, Alexander had a gift for mathematics and business, which ultimately led him to an opportunity at what is now Princeton where he quickly made the United States his new home.”

History records that the calm and cautious Washington mentored the brash and headstrong Hamilton during the Revolutionary War and his presidency. The subtlety lies in the fact that Washington’s success was very much dependent on Hamilton’s. What history has taught us is that regardless of what rank in society to which you are born, your common goals between and among people can lead to astonishing results. While Washington enjoyed the privilege of the upper echelon of society, he was still very ambitious. He realized and understood that he could not reach his goals alone. Although their personal styles were different, Washington and Hamilton complemented each other – and achieved together what no two men had accomplished in establishing our country.

This duo with their unexpected relationship struck a chord with me, not just to the tune of the Broadway hit show, but

with the realization that mentors come in all shapes and sizes. In many legal institutions today, the majority of our counterparts are white males; those rising to the top usually blossom in their mid- to late-forties, intelligent, confident and considered a resident expert on some topic or another.

I didn’t foresee sharing my legal career with someone with whom I thought I had nothing in common. In fact, one of my earliest legal experiences was

advocating for individuals with disabilities. While I don’t have a physical disability, I found a way to connect with my clients based on similar experiences of feeling marginalized, left out and needing to explain myself just because of the way I was born.

THEY DON’T LOOK LIKE ME

When I started my legal career, I found myself surrounded by people who were not like me at all. It is quite intimidating, to be a young lawyer and young mother facing the challenges of our profession. There’s a sense of comfort when you have others around you, having similar life experiences, being there to help guide you through. For many of us, those familiar faces are not the ones mentoring us on the art of billing, or the rules of

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evidence or interpreting legal doctrines. When I was first paired with my mentor, my own insecurity of being in the minority hindered my ability to let my guard down.

NATURAL PROGRESSION

I often feel like the first thing that people see when they look at me is the color of my skin and begin to project their stereotypes about Indian people (whether consciously or not). This was no less true with my mentor. I was constantly pressuring myself to fit into the expectation of what I thought my mentor may have wanted to hear, or into what box I needed to fit into. I can still remember one of our first conversations. Somehow the topic of my ethnicity came up, and he said—one of my favorite lines—“Oh, you are Indian, so is my neighbor.” What I wanted to say was, “No way, all my neighbors are White,”—but I didn't, because this wasn't the first time someone has told me that they have an Indian friend, neighbor, favorite restaurant or some other Indian contact in their life. I get it, there are over 1.2 billion of us in the world, so I am sure you know at least one. But I recall that that was one of the first conversations with my mentor that allowed me to open myself up to him. While it took us over a solid year to finally break the ice, I allowed my diversity to be an educational opportunity for the both of us. Thankfully, he embraced it.

TWO-WAY RELATIONSHIP

What I started to learn was that our differences were an opportunity to share my culture, experiences and life lessons. I saw firsthand how this transformed my mentor's mindset about women, minorities and even legal issues. For example, in representing a large insurance carrier in a coverage dispute relative to a policy's vacancy exclusion, one culturally-specific fact that arose in the case was

that the insured's father regularly slept on the floor. I was able to explain that sleeping on the floor without a mattress is actually a common phenomenon in many Asian cultures. While this did not legally alter the coverage decision, it's interesting to note how our cultural perspectives can challenge each other's minds.

Another example occurred during a business trip when the clerk at the airline counter saw me approaching the line where my colleague was standing. I was just waiting for him to check-in, but before I even opened my mouth, the clerk shouted, “Ma'am, this line is for preferred customers.” I politely told the clerk that I was just waiting for my co-worker. As we walked away, my co-worker asked the obvious question, “How did he know whether or not you were a preferred customer?” I just smiled and said, “Welcome to my world.”

Similarly, I have benefited from the deep understanding of my mentor's subject matter expertise and confidence in a particular area of the law. I embraced this knowledge and learned how he has been able to interact with clients, become a problem solver for them and effectively manage those relationships. I have witnessed how my mentor's confidence can demand attention from a client, a judge or a witness. While he may not be aware of the privilege that he has of being a white male in our profession, it is not lost on me how some of the very same people react to me in similar circumstances. I try not to let this hold me back and instead rely on his mentorship and expertise to demand the same. Additionally, I see how he reacts very differently to some of the same experiences we have gone through, whether on a case or dealing with a work issue. His reaction is no less right or wrong, just different from my own. This has created opportunities to discuss our reactions and work and how we may want to position ourselves on an issue for a client, with the firm or on a personal level. Regardless of

the path chosen, it has taught us to embrace one of the fundamentals of being a lawyer—learning to think how the other side is going to present their case. These experiences cannot be taught. They are just that: experiences to see, feel and live through in order to become a better attorney for myself and for my clients.

I feel that our unlikely pairing has created a place for understanding differences, acknowledging our shortcomings and creating a better work environment for our firm and our clients. I will never diminish the value and importance of having more and more people in our workplace that are diverse, but there is an equally important value of taking the opportunities we are given and educating those around us of the importance of our differences and how they can better our work product and bring us together.

How else then could two men who were so different win the Revolutionary War, enact the Constitution and create the federal government? Theirs was one productive partnership—who's to say that yours couldn't be as well? ■

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