

How I Made Chief DEI Officer and Principal: 'The Key to Success for Me Is Being Open to Defining and Redefining What Success Looks Like,' Says Kimya Johnson of Jackson Lewis

'Seek to understand what being a member of firm leadership involves from those who are currently holding those positions and seek to understand what the written and unwritten paths are for attaining the roles.'

By Tasha Norman

[Kimya Johnson](#), 47, Jackson Lewis, P.C., Philadelphia office.

Job title: Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion officer (CDEIO) and Principal.

Practice area: Employment law. **Law school and year of graduation:** Case Western Reserve University School of Law, 2002.

How long have you been a partner at the firm and were you a partner at another firm before joining Jackson Lewis? I joined Jackson Lewis in December 2021 as a principal (partner). I have been practicing law at the partner level since 2013. I was a senior counsel, a partner-level position, at Ogletree, Deakins, Nash, Smoak & Stewart. I was at Ogletree Deakins for three years before leaving in December 2021 to assume the CDEIO and principal role at Jackson Lewis.

What was the biggest surprise you experienced in leading the firm's key initiatives? My biggest surprise when I began leading diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) 10 years ago was how many different aspects of my life, experiences, education and personality would be called on to practice employment law and lead DEI.

Understanding and leading DEI requires the ability to bring my lived experiences/being, my knowledge of employment/DEI law, my varied professional experiences within and outside law firms, my community relationships, and my empathy with me to work every day. I was slightly surprised by the range of skills, traits, and experiences—beyond law and beyond knowing the organization—that I would have to draw on.

What's the key to running a successful initiative in your



Kimya Johnson

opinion and, based on recent events such as COVID and work-from-home policies, has your definition of success changed since 2020/2021?

The key to success for me is being open to defining and redefining what success looks like. The DEI arena is quickly evolving and how we defined success 10, five or two years ago, which largely focused on ensuring people who were historically underrepresented were hired, is no longer the metric. We are adapting. I am much more

(Courtesy photo)

attuned to measuring DEI success by both quantitative (data that does not lie) and qualitative (shaped experiences) measures.

Personally, success for me after the death of George Floyd, the continued fight for justice, and pandemic realities means being able to be present mentally, physically and emotionally for my family, clients, team, and colleagues. Nothing I endeavor to do at the firm will happen unless I can be present. And I have a unique opportunity to ensure we have a workplace where all can be present as well. If our clients, colleagues and communities feel the trust and safety to be present at Jackson Lewis, I feel I/we have been successful.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your leadership role? I have been fortunate to have many influencers, mentors, and role models throughout my career, but my husband, Rev. Dr. Kevin R. Johnson, is my greatest career influence. In her book “Lean

In,” Sheryl Sandberg said, “I truly believe that the single most important career decision that a woman makes is whether she will have a life partner and who that partner is.”

My choice to marry Kevin, and the life and events that followed us, had the greatest influence on my career. His work provided my financial support through law school, where I did well and had the ability to focus on taking/passing the New York bar. His support as an active and engaged parent helped me to navigate being a practicing lawyer and mother to our three children. His calling as a pastor, educator, entrepreneur/CEO, and community/civil rights activist has provided spiritual and community support allowing me to be present, have a successful legal career, and ascend to my current role.

What’s the best piece of advice you could give a partner who wants to make it to firm leadership and/or manage key firm initiatives? Seek to understand what being a partner or



Sara Jane Shanahan

a member of firm leadership involves from those who are currently holding those positions, seek to understand what the written and unwritten paths are for attaining the roles, and decide with as much foresight and awareness you can muster whether you want to go for it and why. If you don’t know the path to partner or leadership, you are less likely to make it. And finally, if you don’t know why you are pursuing the path (or not), you are less likely to stay in it.

If you had a chance to advise or mentor your younger self (at any stage). What advice would you give to yourself? Extend the same grace you give to others to yourself.