



Top 10 Takeaways from My First Year as a Big Law Diversity and Inclusion Leader

BY KRYSTAL STUDAVENT RAMSEY, ESQ.

“Diversity, equity, and inclusion work is a slow burn and long-term play, which requires patience, strategic focus, a solid foundation, the proper infrastructure, and leadership buy-in to be successful,” a diversity, equity, and inclusion (“DEI”) leader and one of my mentors told me before I started in my new role as the first full-time Director of Diversity and Inclusion at Blank Rome LLP, an Am Law 100 firm with 14 offices and an 1000+ employee workforce. Blank Rome was founded by two attorneys that were barred from practicing law at established law firms because of their religion who decided to venture out and create a firm where attorneys of all backgrounds could practice law and be the best attorney they could be. I was excited to join a firm with this foundation and to continue advancing DEI firmwide while “answering the call” for racial equity and social justice set out by our first and former Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, Judge Nathaniel R. Jones, who was a civil rights trailblazer, a former chief legal spokesman for the civil rights movement, a federal appeals court judge who devoted his long career to eradicating the legacy of slavery, and the general counsel of the NAACP.

I started at the firm virtually in January 2021, not having met any of my colleagues in person before I started--a scenario that many people encountered if they started a new job during the pandemic. And, I was in good company. According to LinkedIn data, hiring of chief diversity and inclusion officers and senior leaders in the U.S. across industries exploded, growing by 111 percent in 2021. In relation, there was a major uptick in hiring and elevation of DEI leaders across the legal industry.

As a way to immerse myself in Blank Rome’s culture and build relationships across the firm, I went on a “look, listen, and learn” tour, meeting with close to 200 people across offices, practices, and functions in 90 days. Throughout the year, I had calls and meetings with DEI leaders across industries to share knowledge and brainstorm new ideas. I also received numerous calls about my new role and how I got started, which led me to start a journal to capture some of the highlights from my first year.

Below are my top five takeaways and top five highlights that I am sharing in hopes they are useful to new and existing DEI leaders alike. We have more work to do and look forward to continuous growth and positive change.



Krystal Studavent Ramsey, Esq.
Director of Diversity and Inclusion
Blank Rome LLP

Top 5 Takeaways

1. When you begin as a new DEI leader, you may be tempted to do everything right and have big wins in your first year. Please remember that this is “a long-term play,” so don’t feel compelled to fix everything at once or “boil the ocean.” It is unrealistic and will cause burnout quickly. You can accelerate your efforts depending on the DEI maturity of your organization. Evaluate and figure out where the organization is in their DEI journey before you proceed with planning or making changes. Appreciate the “slow burn” and know that change takes time, process, and buy-in, so build strong relationships, take time to evaluate the landscape, and strategically map out how you will approach change, while taking each day in stride.

2. You will, at times, feel like you have hopped on a moving train (“all aboard!”) but you cannot stop all current operations during your ramp up period. Prioritize which operations must continue for the commercial business to continue running smoothly and those that you want to put on hold for further evaluation before resuming.

3. Reporting to an officer of the firm or organization—a CEO and/or COO preferably—is very helpful in gaining operational knowledge and positioning yourself to embed DEI in all operations. The managing partner/CEO and chief operations officer should be authentically invested and intimately involved with DEI, which I am happy to have present at my firm, working closely with Blank Rome’s Managing Partner and CEO Grant Palmer, and Chief Operations Officer Shonette Gaston, who have an unwavering commitment to DEI. To operationalize and scale DEI in your organization, you need top-down buy-in, to build a multifunctional team, and collaborate across functions, as well as form external partnerships to exchange value.

4. Data, data, and more data! Data is the gasoline to fuel your decisions, prioritize needs, gap spot, shape strategy, and drive progress. Work closely with your HR, talent, IT, marketing, and other key teams to collect and analyze data in an integrated way.



5. Lastly, incorporate self-care no matter what you do! As my mom tells me all the time, “you can’t pour from an empty cup.” If you are not caring for yourself, you won’t be able to practice what we often preach in this role about bringing our best selves to work because you will be burnt out, disengaged, and dissuaded a lot. Take time for you. Spend time with family and friends, and in nature. Your organization will thank you for it!

Top 5 Highlights

1. 21-Day Leadership Challenge: Our 21-Day Leadership Challenge was piloted with a diverse group of the firm’s most senior leaders, including our managing partner and chair. Our goals were to raise personal awareness about anti-racism, promote self-education, enable difficult conversations, bolster empathy, gain insight into thinking differently, and, in turn, to be more proactive and inclusive leaders. The pilot group completed 21 daily assignments and participated in five discussion group meetings led by an outside facilitator who helped create a safe space for participants to be vulnerable, open minded, and authentic as they discussed issues on racial equity and social justice with a particular focus on the legal profession. To date, six cohorts of our partners, leaders, and senior business professionals have participated in the program. Our 21-Day Leadership Challenge has generated very positive feedback, internally and externally, with participants indicating that the program was remarkably impactful to them, both personally and professionally.

2. DEI Awards Show: In October 2021, we hosted our DEI Awards show. Blank Rome Los Angeles Partner Stacy D. Phillips was awarded the Bonnie Glantz Fatell Women’s Advocacy and Leadership Award for her promotion and advancement of women, and Blank Rome Philadelphia Partner Chris Lewis, also a 2022 Savoy Magazine Most Influential Black Lawyer and a former chief of diversity and inclusion at Blank Rome, was awarded the Honorable Nathaniel R. Jones Diversity and Inclusion Award for his influence

and investment in diversity and inclusion, internally and externally. We had entertainment from Blank Rome Partner David Perry’s band, Athensville, and the Philadelphia Girls’ Choir.

3. Fifth Annual Women’s Leadership Summit: We successfully hosted our Fifth Annual Women’s Leadership Summit on October 14, 2021 with 451 powerhouse women in attendance.

4. Project Pronoun: In June 2021, in commemoration of Pride month, BR Pride, our LGBTQ+ affinity group, launched our Project Pronoun initiative, an internal initiative aimed at promoting authenticity and gender identity firmwide with the goals of educating on gender inclusivity and fluidity and to mitigate bias against the LGBTQ+ community. We provided guidance on ways to use inclusive and non-binary pronouns in various communications and tips for being an inclusive ally. As a result, colleagues across the firm have added their pronouns to their e-mail signature blocks and virtual platforms.

5. Standing in solidarity with our Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander colleagues: The organization Stop AAPI Hate has collected more than 3,800 reports of verbal abuse, harassment, and physical assaults nationally against Asians and Asian Americans throughout the pandemic, 68 percent of which were directed at Asian American women. With the increase in violent events against Asians and Asian Americans, we raised awareness across our firm by having a transparent firm conversation moderated by Blank Rome Philadelphia Partner and Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer Emeritus Sophia Lee, also a co-chair of Blank Rome’s diversity and inclusion committee, and sharing resources to help our colleagues learn more about the Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander experience in the United States.

At a time when the workplace as we know it is forcefully transforming before our very eyes—with employee upheaval, office space reconfigurations, new work models, and mindset shifts—this is an opportune time to work together with our colleagues, clients, and communities to advance positive change and make our world better. **S**