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Dear DEI, Esq: I’m Competing with My Coworker

Diversity and Inclusion



In this series, DEI, Esq. is helping individuals who may have experienced or perceived some sort of bias become bias interrupters.

***Dear DEI, Esq.*,**

I am on the global sales team of a great company, and I've been working hard to excel at my job and gain the respect of my colleagues and management in hopes of moving up within the company. For four years, I was the only female of color and one of only three females on a team of 46 salespeople.

Recently, another Asian American female — also an experienced salesperson — joined our team. I was asked to help her get acclimated to the company, which I gladly did. Showing her the ropes, helping her establish key relationships — you name it. She hasn't been with the company for too long, but she is already exceeding her sales objectives.

I'm feeling conflicted — I want her to succeed, but I also feel threatened by her success and am concerned that my prospects of advancing in the company may be in jeopardy. I've decided to start focusing more on my own growth within the company. She is already doing fine and doesn't need my support anymore. Am I overreacting?

Please help me sort this out,

Conflicted coworker

Dear Conflicted coworker,

We understand your predicament. You may be experiencing the "tug of war" bias pattern, which is a form of gender or race bias, where conflict develops because of perception that there is room for only

one female or one racial minority employee at the top. No need to overstress or overreact though! Here is some food for thought (and action).

The thought that there is only one seat at the table for Asian American females is as outdated as corduroy. Understand that your opportunity is solely yours, and your success and chances for advancement do not depend on others.

Just because someone you believe is like you is also successful doesn't mean your chances for upward mobility are shot. Focus on what you bring to the table (no pun intended) instead of stressing over the notion that others are outpacing you.

Your situation is not a zero-sum game. Your colleague's success does not equal your failure. Someone may outperform you in the short run but think about your situation in the long-term. If your colleague moves up first, celebrate her success! Don't distance yourself and burn bridges. If she is on top, she can advocate for you and help elevate you. You are stronger together, and your turn will come. Focus on lifting each other up.

So, how do you course-correct? Make a move to turn your perceived adversary into an ally; schedule a casual chat with your colleague and say: "We've become distant recently. How do we get back on track? I am excited you are here and hope we can have a strong, mutually supportive relationship." And when she does something great, don't be shy about singing her praises to others. If you're worried that others will see the two of you as competition for "one spot," then this can help dispel that misperception.

Hope everything works out well for both of you!

DEI, Esq.

DEI, Esq. is comprised of in-house counsel who share a deep passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion. While the members, Jane Howard-Martin, Connie Almond, Olesja Cormney, Jennifer N. Jones, and Meyling Ly Ortiz, work as employment counsel at Toyota Motor North America, Inc., their views and the thought-leadership expressed are their own and not necessarily the views of their employer.

Learn how the ACC Maturity Model can help you.

Jane Howard-Martin



Vice President and Assistant General Counsel

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Jane Howard-Martin is vice president and assistant general counsel for Toyota Motor North America, Inc. (TMNA) and manages the Labor, Employment, Immigration, Benefits and Trade Secrets practice. Howard-Martin leads the labor and employment practice group that is responsible for providing legal advice and counsel and managing litigation and labor matters for a workforce of 33,993 based in our North America affiliates, including the nine North American Manufacturing Centers (NAMCs), R&D, Finance, and Headquarters functions.

Prior to joining Toyota in 2003, Howard-Martin was a partner with Morgan, Lewis and Bockius, LLP in their Los Angeles and Pittsburgh offices, and previously was a partner at Kirkpatrick & Lockhart in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Howard-Martin has been featured in a number of publications and symposiums. She authored a column on employment issues for USAToday.com, a treatise on Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act and served on the Editorial Review Board of the Pennsylvania Labor Letter. Howard-Martin also appeared as a panelist on MSNBC's "Today in America" on the issue of harassment. She is a frequent speaker on employment law topics at various conferences including those held by the ABA, the National Employment Law Council, and the American Employment Law Council. In November 2020, Howard-Martin received the ABA Honorable Bernice B. Donald Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Legal Profession Award. She is the past President (2009) and currently serves on the board of directors of the California Employment Law Council and is also a board member of the American Employment Law Council. She is also a fellow with the College of Labor and Employment Lawyers.

Howard-Martin earned a BA from Harvard University in 1979 and received her juris doctorate degree from Harvard Law School in 1982.

She lives in Los Angeles with her husband, Gus Martin, who is on the facility at California State University, Dominguez Hills. In her free time, she enjoys ballroom and hip-hop dancing, trying international recipes, writing historical fiction, and travel.

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Connie Almond is managing counsel in the labor and employment law group for Toyota Motor North America, Inc., a mobility company headquartered in Plano, TX.

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Olesja Cormney is managing counsel in the labor and employment group for Toyota Motor North America, Inc., a mobility company headquartered in Plano, TX. She is a strategic counsel and a proactive problem solver, offering an innovative perspective and an agile approach based on her prior business experience. Cormney is honored to be on the board of the ACC Dallas Fort-Worth Chapter.

Jennifer N. Jones



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Jennifer Jones is managing counsel in the labor and employment group at Toyota Motor North America, Inc. She has over a decade of experience counseling employers on a broad range of labor and employment law issues. As one of the founding members of DEI, Esq., she has a deep passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and has authored many articles and participated in many panels on the subject. She also sits on the board of two nonprofit organizations, both with a mission of ensuring that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to quality secondary and post-secondary education. In her free time, Jones strives to be a “fun mom” for her two small children

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Meyling "Mey" Ly Ortiz



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Meyling "Mey" Ly Ortiz is managing counsel of employment at Toyota Motor North America, Inc. Her passions include mentoring, championing diversity and inclusion and a personal blog: TheMeybe.com. At home, you can find her doing her best to be a "fun" mom to a toddler and a preschooler and chasing her best self on her Peloton. You can follow her on LinkedIn. And you knew this was coming: her opinions are hers alone.