

# Navigating Career Advancement: A Strategic Guide for BIPOC Professional Staff

## A. Career Pathways in Legal Professional Development: Challenges and Complexities

The legal profession faces significant structural challenges in professional development career paths. Law firms have expanded professional staff roles over the past decade, yet these positions lack standardization across organizations, creating opacity in responsibilities, titles, and compensation structures.

Meanwhile, law school career services remain relatively static, with counselors working under a single Assistant Dean in hierarchical structures that offer minimal advancement opportunities. This forces talented professionals to either leave entirely or pivot to unrelated higher education roles—transitions complicated by the scarcity of openings and the difficulty demonstrating transferable skills to law school department heads beyond their perceived limited scope.

For some BIPOC professionals, these challenges are compounded by workplace bias, microaggressions, and discrimination, adding emotional labor that further complicates career navigation and advancement.

## B. Navigating the Emotional Tax of Career Advancement

For BIPOC Professionals who encounter bias in their career journeys, managing both professional growth and the psychological impact of these experiences can be challenging. BIPOC professionals often face the additional cognitive burden of distinguishing between merit-based feedback and bias-related barriers. Consider these approaches to maintain momentum in your career development:

1. Understand Power Dynamics and Politics
2. Leverage Your Connections: Identify Mentors and Sponsors
3. Master the Compensation Game
4. Be a Self-Promoter
5. Be in Control of Your Own Professional Development
6. Embrace Challenges that Highlight Your Talent
7. Engage with a Professional Network
8. Imposter Who? Reclaim Your Power

### Guided Reflection:

- Which of these factors are ones you would like to explore or work on?
- Is there an emotional tax that comes up for you that is not on the list above?

## 1. Understanding Power Dynamics and Politics

The path to advancement in law schools and law firms often reflects complex power structures rather than pure meritocracy. Success frequently depends on understanding the unwritten rules and influential relationships that shape these environments. If you are striving to advance, it can be difficult to figure out what information you need to grow or who the decision makers are at your firm or school. Sometimes the people you report to may be the bottleneck to advancement. How do you get around this?

### **Figure out how things work where you are:**

- Talk to people inside your place of work and reach out to people who left to go elsewhere. The people who left are more likely to be less guarded and give you a holistic perspective so you can make your own assessment on how to navigate your work options. The more you understand how your workplace operates the less likely you are to waste your time and energy feeling like you have no control. You can make an informed decision as to whether you can grow where you are or if you need to make a move.

## 2. Leverage Your Connections: Identify Mentors and Sponsors

### **Identify Your Sponsors:**

- Find a sponsor at your place of employment. They don't have to be in your department or even do the same work as you do. These are people who have a finger on the pulse of how things work and understand the politics of where you work. Develop a professional relationship where you can share your ideas and get their guidance. Sponsors are the ones who will talk you up to those who have power in the room. They are the ones who share your add value and your stories. It takes time to think through who these people are, and it also requires you to step out of your comfort zone to identify and cultivate your champions. For BIPOC professionals it's important to expand your network and include people who don't look like you or have the same background as you. You want people who will challenge your assumptions and expand your mindset. Use this same strategy to find sponsors in your professional network, and outside your workplace.

### **Find Your Mentors:**

- Mentors provide long term and short time career advice. You can have mentors from different industries and backgrounds. Once trust has been established, get their honest opinion on how to navigate next steps in your career, professional development and even life transitions.

#### Guided Reflection:

- Make a list of sponsors at your place or work or outside your place of work.
- Do you have a mentor or admired others who have supportive mentors? What were the characteristics that made the mentors helpful?

### 3. Master the Compensation Game

BIPOC professionals, on average, make less than their white counterparts. It's important to have an understanding of what people are getting paid at your level or at the level you aspire to. This requires market research, understanding outside factors impacting the market (e.g. AI or recession) and the cost of living in your location. Tools like the NALP Salary Guide, Robert Half Legal and Glass Door are good starting points, but it's beneficial to talk to colleagues in your area and get a sense of what salary packages look like. It's important to think beyond salary. What is included in your benefits and retirement package? Are your professional association fees paid by your employer? Is there a training package you can take advantage of? Can you negotiate professional development metrics (e.g. having time off and expenses covered for attending the NALP conference). Reach out to trusted advisors and mentors to see if your understanding is on par with market expectations. Looking at compensation as a whole and educating yourself will empower you to know your worth and advocate for yourself in the marketplace.

#### Guided Reflection:

- Take a look at the NALP salary guide or another metric, is your compensation aligned to industry standards?
- If your compensation is not aligned, what are the factors? Are there other benefits you are getting beyond salary? If you decide to re-negotiate your salary, what factors would you raise from your research?

### 4. Be a Self-Promoter

When it comes to sharing your add value, professionals fall into three categories, (1) those who do incredible things at work that no one knows about, (2) those who post everything they do on LinkedIn regardless of the level of relevance and (3) those who occasionally take a moment to share what they are doing but are usually too busy to think about it. People who advance quickly tend to be good at self-promotion. However, you don't have to be out there selling yourself at every turn to raise your profile. Embrace the art of the humble brag. Let people know what you are doing and find ways to show how those things align with the goals of your employer. Track everything you do. Keep a running list of accomplishments to discuss at your next review, promotion discussion, or job interview. You want to have a handy list of your accomplishments ready to go at any time.

#### Guided Reflection:

1. Make a list of work accomplishments you are proud of? How have you documented them? Is there a stakeholder you can share your accomplishments with at work? How about outside of work?
2. How do you feel about promoting yourself? Does it feel natural or uncomfortable for you? Why or why not?

## 5. Be in Control of Your Own Professional Development

### Self-Directed Learning:

- The focus of law school and law firms is to develop students and associates. There is little professional development resources allocated to staff. Many professional staff must figure out for themselves the type of training and development that would be beneficial for them.
- Your professional development journey begins with self-reflection and goal setting. Start by identifying your goals and set out a plan to achieve them. Ask yourself what skills and knowledge are required for your next professional challenge and identify the skill deficits you have. Then set out an incremental plan to achieve those goals.
- Not all your professional development goals will involve costly trainings. Your learning can take many forms such as reading industry journals, enrolling in online courses, attending professional development presentations and events at conferences. You can also seek out opportunities to present and speak at events.

### Your Employer Won't Pay for Training, Now What?

- You may be at the point in your professional development where you need to obtain a certification or more formal training. If the training is something short of a degree that would help you professionally that your employer is not willing to pay for, make a plan to pay for it yourself. Before you take that step always check to see if your employer has a professional development budget for staff. They may not cover your entire training, but even a partial payment would help you get closer to your goal.

#### Guided Reflection:

- What are some professional development goals that you have?
- Make a list of and/or research trainings or courses that you would like to pursue?

## 6. Embrace Challenges that Highlight Your Talent

### Do something that makes you uncomfortable:

- Take on a new challenge at work, give a presentation on a something that is outside your area of expertise, or propose a new idea to your superiors which forces you to step outside your safe zone. Taking these steps - challenges your limitations and allows you to grow in profound ways. You not only build new skills, but you gain confidence which can propel growth and change.

### Embrace Failure:

- Unlike entrepreneurs who may fail a few times before they succeed and are celebrated for that process, lawyers are risk averse. They are paid to solve problems and know all the answers. This culture is present in leadership of law firm and law schools. The emphasis on getting it right the first time can stifle creativity and growth. However, the biggest growth and learning comes from failure. When you try something new you will not always be successful. The process of creating something may lead you to your next job, create a

new skill or introduce you to a new people. Give yourself space to try things that scare you. You might be surprised at the benefits that come from taking that chance.

Guided Reflection:

- Brainstorm some professional development opportunities outside your comfort zone.
- Make a plan to pursue one professional development opportunity that scares you in the next six months.

## 7. Engage with a Professional Network

You are engaging with a professional network by reading this handout because you or your colleagues were part of the NALP Education conference. Your ability to move and grow as a professional stem from the networks you cultivate over time.

### **Make a Contribution:**

- Aside from being a passive member of your professional network(s), find an activity that you like to do or are curious about within your network. Whether you like to give talks, put together events or draft resources, professional organizations are great places to expand your creativity. While engaging in something that is enjoyable for you, you not only make a contribution to your network, but you also become noticeable to others.

### **A Place to Shine Outside of Work:**

- The people you work with won't always appreciate your range of present or emerging talent. The scope of your job may also limit what ideas you can express at work. Your professional networks are a great space for you to showcase and develop your ideas, skills and knowledge.

### **Exchange of Ideas:**

- Being involved in a professional network prevents stagnation. Being around people in your industry helps you generate new ideas, learn new things that you can apply in your current position or your next job. This is especially important for BIPOC professionals who may be combatting barriers to advancement. Access to information helps people make changes and take professional risks.

Guided Reflection:

- List some professional networks you would like join?
- How can being part of professional networks impact your career?

## 8. Imposter Who? Reclaim Your Power

Imposter syndrome disproportionately impacts women and people from marginalized communities because most work environments are not created to account for their success. Until leaders consider the systematic bias and racism that is part of most work cultures, women and people from marginalized communities will continue to experience a higher levels of imposter thoughts than the rest of the population.

### **Sneaky Thoughts:**

- To lessen the power of imposter thoughts one must understand these thoughts are sneaky. Imposter thoughts are automatic thoughts that pop into our mind when we are faced with a challenge or are about to try something new. Some popular ones are “I am a fraud, wait until they find me out,” or “I am not smart enough to be here and I have fooled others into thinking otherwise.”

### **Default Network:**

- Imposter thoughts are automatic, negative thoughts (ANTS). They have been created from messages we received in childhood, from personal or professional interactions, and from people in authority like coaches and teachers who shaped our educational lives. They also stem from failures we have experienced. Instead of viewing failure as a learning opportunity, we become fearful of failing again and will do anything to avoid risking failure. Most of these automatic thoughts go unnoticed by us. They play in the background of our mind like an old episode of a show we have watched countless times, but don't have the energy to walk over and change the channel.

### **Notice, Ask for Evidence, Discard:**

- The only way you can change the channel on an ANT is to (1) recognize it when it shows up, (2) come up with evidence to support it (*which you never can*), and (3) discard the thought. For example, if you have an ANT that tells you “You're not smart enough to be here” you will be hard pressed to find evidence to support that thought. The more you recognize your ANT's, the more you will be able to talk back to the nonsense your ANT tells you and start to change the channel on those thoughts. Your ANTS only have as much power as you give them.

### Guided Reflection:

- When do automatic negative thoughts (ANTS) about your professional abilities come up? Do you believe your ANTS? Do you try to challenge them?
- How are imposter thoughts impacting your career decisions? What are some safeguards you can put into place to reduce the power of imposter thoughts?

# Beyond Comfort: Understanding Risk in Professional Transitions

Navigating a career change requires self-reflection, particularly when examining your relationship with risk through a cultural lens. For many BIPOC professionals, risk-taking is profoundly influenced by familial and cultural narratives that may have shaped ones understanding of professional success and security.

Understanding your tolerance for risk means examining the complex interplay between personal ambition and cultural expectations. These expectations, often rooted in generational experiences of survival, economic stability, and social mobility, can unconsciously guide our career decisions. By acknowledging these underlying influences, you can develop a more nuanced approach to professional change.

## A. Key Factors to Consider on This Journey:

1. Critically examine your current perceptions of risk, tracing how your cultural background has informed these perspectives. Recognize the inherited wisdom and potential limitations in these narratives.
2. Identify your unique growth opportunities. Align your personal aspirations with a thoughtful assessment of potential challenges and rewards.
3. Develop personalized risk-taking strategies that take into consideration cultural context while empowering you to pursue meaningful professional transformation.

Reframe what it means for you to transform risk from a source of anxiety into a strategic tool for personal and professional development.

### Guided Reflection:

- What associations or insights come to mind when you consider the concept of risk?
- What does risk-taking mean for you?

**Taking calculated risks in the workplace and/or educational setting has the potential to:**

- Push you beyond your current capabilities
- Involve potential risk of failure
- Offer significant personal or professional growth
- Requires strategic thinking and calculated risk-taking

## B. Exploring Your Risk Narrative

Our desire and ability to take risks can have roots in our upbringing, the expectations put upon us by others, and societal expectations based on gender and culture. Our risk taking and aversion can

even stem from the messages we have received in educational settings and at work. It's important to identify barriers to risk so that you can see if they are blocking you from moving forward in your career.

### **Early Risk Messages:**

- What messages about risk-taking did you absorb during your childhood and early development?
- How did the significant people in your life - parents, teachers, mentors - frame the concept of taking risks and/or avoiding risks?

### **Risk Values in Action:**

- When you think about risk, what specific behaviors or actions emerge that reflect your core values?
- Can you describe moments where your approach to risk revealed something fundamental about your belief system and/or cultural expectation(s)?

#### Guided Reflection:

Consider exploring:

- Family narratives about safety and adventure
- Cultural or personal scripts about courage and caution
- Pivotal experiences that shaped your risk perception
- The emotional landscape surrounding your risk-taking decisions

## **C. The Model Minority Myth**

The model minority myth is a harmful stereotype that portrays some minority groups as uniformly successful, effectively erasing the group's diversity and complexity through three key areas:

### **Invisibility:**

- Treats the minority group as a monolithic, homogeneous group
- Suppresses individual stories and unique cultural experiences
- Renders the community's challenges and differences invisible

### **Achievement:**

- Assumes all people within the minority group are naturally high achieving
- Stereotyping the group as academically and professionally exceptional
- Creates unrealistic expectations and psychological pressure
- Overlooks individual variations and structural barriers

### **Acceptance:**

- Suggests the minority group(s) has fully integrated into American society
- Implies the minority group(s) have overcome racial discrimination
- Uses their perceived success to minimize discussions of racism
- Positions the group as a "model" minority to divide racial groups
- Has impacts on the group's mobility and growth

### **The Myth Ultimately:**

- Masks systemic racism
- Creates unfair individual and collective expectations
- Prevents nuanced discussions about racial inequality
- Undermines the diverse experiences of minority communities
- Prevents upward mobility in the workplace

#### Guided Reflection:

- In what ways do current media, educational systems, or social narratives contribute to making certain community experiences invisible?
- How can we create spaces that genuinely celebrate and amplify individual voices within minority communities?
- Consider the psychological toll of constantly being expected to be "exceptional" or "perfect", how might this pressure impact you or your colleagues' mental health and personal development?
- How can we reframe conversations about success to recognize individual paths and diverse forms of accomplishment?
- In what ways does the concept of a "model minority" actually reinforce rather than challenge racial hierarchies?
- How can we develop more nuanced, empathetic approaches to understanding community experiences that don't rely on simplistic narratives of success or acceptance?

## **D. BIPOC Professionals: Navigating Workplace Dynamics**

What are some factors that come up for BIPOC professionals in the workplace?

### **Standing Out**

- Brings visibility and potential leadership opportunities
- Can create pressure to represent entire cultural groups (e.g. BIPOC professionals being asked to be the face of diversity at the firm)
- Risk being tokenized or experiencing heightened scrutiny and stereotyping

### **Workplace Conflict**

- Can experience challenges in asserting boundaries without being perceived negatively
- Struggle to balance professional communication with cultural authenticity
- Manage the emotional labor of navigating complex interactions

### **Confronting Perfectionism**

- Battling internalized pressure to be "twice as good"
- Addressing imposter syndrome
- Develop resilience in uncertain professional environments

## Core Insights

- Unique perspectives are valuable
- Individual experiences vary widely
- Strategic self-advocacy is key to professional growth

### Guided Reflection:

- When have you felt your visibility as a BIPOC professional was both an opportunity and a burden?
- Describe a situation where you found it challenging to assert your professional boundaries.
- How does the internalized pressure to be "twice as good" show up in your professional life?
- What are the emotional and professional costs of maintaining this standard?

## E. The Dilemma: What Type of Risk Taker Are You?

When it comes to making a change in our careers. We may stand in our own way and not even realize it. When thinking about making a career move, we may evaluate our knowledge, experience, and skills (KES) and overlook personal qualities such as adaptability, leadership potential, initiative, resilience, quick thinking, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. It's important to evaluate the narrative we have adopted about ourselves and add nuance to our professional "add value" as a whole.

### **What we tell ourselves about risk:**

- The consequence is too great; it's not the right time
- Danger ahead!
- We do not have enough information or knowledge, experience and skills
- The reward is too small
- It is not important enough

### **Why take the risk?**

- Realize your potential
- Learning and growth
- Seek opportunities to innovate and create
- Why not you? What happens if you keep playing small?
- Necessity

### Guided Reflection:

- What is a risk you would like to take?
- Describe a professional or personal risk you would like to take or are thinking of taking. What do you hope to accomplish?
- What would need to happen for you to take the risk?
- What would be the worst possible outcome(s) if you took the risk?
- What are the alternatives to not taking the risk?

## F. Create Your Personal Board of Directors:

One way to navigate risk is to assemble a group of trusted advisors whom you can reach out to and seek advice on a variety of topics. Your advisors should be people you can rely on to guide you, encourage you, and help you advance in your professional life. Selecting individuals for specific tasks is less daunting because you are not putting all your career questions and concerns on one person. Choose members that would provide differing perspectives on your career. At times, you may find yourself reaching out to some board members more than others. The people you reach out to don't even have to know they are on your board. The value of having people whose advice and guidance you trust comes up when you have career questions you cannot address within your immediate work environment or when guidance is needed. Select your board based on their skills and experience and from different corners of your professional life. Your board members can be former colleagues, NALP members, and even family and friends. They can also serve as accountability partners, especially when you need a cheerleader in your corner.

The members that make a strong team:

- **Trusted Advisor:** Provides knowledge to you in your field or a field you want to get into
- **Coach:** Guides you, and asks you powerful questions that keep you moving forward
- **Mentor:** Gives you support and guidance in your area of interest
- **Sponsor:** Endorses you to others
- **Advocate:** Acts in your best interest at work or in your professional network

### Guided Reflection:

- How would creating a board of directors help you? If you are hesitating, why?
- Write down a list of people who could be on your board of directors. What skills, experience, and strengths can they contribute to your professional development?
- Draft and email and/or calendar a time to reach out to potential board members.