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DILWORTH PAXSON CHAIRMAN AND CEO, AJAY RAJU SHARES HIS VIEWS ABOUT GENDER AND RACE BASED DISPARITY IN THE LEGAL SECTOR WITH LAW360

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Law360: [In Their Own Words: Minority Partners On Reaching The Top](#)

Full transcript of the interview below:

- **TELL ME A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF: NAME, TITLE, BRIEF DESCRIPTION ABOUT YOUR PRACTICE/WHAT YOU DO.**

I'm the Chairman and CEO of Dilworth Paxson LLP, and the founder and General Partner of 215 Capital, a series A venture investment fund. At Dilworth, I manage both day to day operations and the strategic growth of the firm. Both of those functions are guided by our mission to position the firm at the intersection of relationships, value and judgment for the benefit of our clients and the industries and regions in which they operate. We seek to be more than just attorneys, but strategic counsel.

- **LOOKING BACK AT YOUR CAREER, WAS THERE A PARTICULAR MOMENT OR MILESTONE THAT YOU THINK REALLY SET YOU ON THE PATH TO BECOME FIRST A PARTNER/SHAREHOLDER AND THEN A LEADER AT YOUR FIRM?**

From my perspective, charting a course to a successful career entails two critical components; first, you have to find a passion and a purpose, and second, you have to find a tribe for whom to put that purpose into service. As a first generation immigrant, the first tribe I identified was the Indian diaspora community in Philadelphia. Very quickly, the scope of that tribe grew to encompass the city of Philadelphia and region as a whole. As I gained a stronger foothold in Philadelphia's civic and business landscape, more opportunities arose to catalyze entrepreneurial growth for both clients and the businesses in which I had an interest. During my tenure at Dilworth, we have created venture and private equity initiatives in conjunction with the firm to help direct much-needed capital to our clients in the start-up space. Fortifying the financial well-being of those clients has in turn created new opportunities for legal engagement for our firm, and the pattern perpetuates itself.

- **THE DIVERSITY NUMBERS WE'VE BEEN COLLECTING FOR THIS REPORT HAVE BARELY BUDGED OVER THE LAST THREE YEARS. FOR EXAMPLE, THE PERCENTAGE OF RACIALLY DIVERSE PARTNERS HAS STOOD AT 8 PERCENT SINCE 2015. DOES THAT SURPRISE YOU? WHY OR WHY NOT?**

It doesn't surprise me, because when it comes to women and minority representation in corporate leadership, we are still facing an incredibly steep climb out of an incredibly deep hole. But I'm not discouraged. There is currently a greater scrutiny than ever before in the

press and public sphere on the lack of diverse representation across all sectors, including but certainly not limited to law. But what it will take to truly change things is to acknowledge that we've been deluding ourselves about meritocracy and power for too long. Whether malicious or not, or even intentional or not, the pipeline to leadership is shaped by privilege, networks, and inherent bias. It creates a vicious cycle that keeps the same faces at the head of the table while maintaining barriers to truly meritocratic advancement. Until we disrupt that cycle and knock down those barriers, the situation won't change. That means we need to be determined and aggressive about giving more diverse and female professionals not just seats at the table, but at the head of the table. Business still abides by very a hierarchical structure, and that means change has to begin at the top.

– **HAVE THERE BEEN ANY MOMENTS WHERE YOUR PRESENCE AS A DIVERSE LEADER AT THE FIRM REALLY STOOD OUT/MADE A DIFFERENCE FOR THE FIRM OR FOR A JUNIOR ATTORNEY?**

Most law firms still take a lockstep approach when it comes to promoting associates to partners and partners to leadership positions. It's changing, but still the norm. I didn't follow that traditional, lockstep approach to my position today, and I am proud to have disrupted the traditional course for a few junior colleagues of mine as well. For example, by her fourth year in practice, my colleague Dimple Patel was effectively managing the day-to-day relationship with our firm's biggest client, so we promoted her to partner simply because it was commensurate with her level of talent, skill and dedication. Her relatively few years in practice were frankly irrelevant to the calculus. The year following Dimple's promotion, we made Kristin Behrens a partner after six years of practice. She's one of our top rain makers, and it just made sense from any coherent perspective. I'm not necessarily interested in flouting tradition for its own sake, but for any individual or organization to compete, much less thrive, in this radically changing new environment, it's absolutely critical to interrogate received conventional wisdom at every turn.

– **ACCORDING TO DATA FROM THE ABA, ATTORNEYS OF COLOR GRADUATING LAW SCHOOLS SEEM TO BE CHOOSING CAREER PATHS OUTSIDE OF BIGLAW. WHAT DO YOU THINK TURNS ATTORNEYS OF COLOR AWAY FROM CONSIDERING PRIVATE PRACTICE?**

I think there are a few countervailing factors. For one, talented attorneys of color are in high demand. They're highly sought after by in-house legal departments, government agencies, and other non-law firm enterprises, so there's just a broader spectrum of choice for the very best and brightest. I think others are motivated by frustration; frustration that, consciously or not, law firms often still recruit, retrain and promote according to archaic habits and mentalities. Lawyers are a stubborn breed, and probably among the last to admit that implicit bias plays a significant role in their decision making. That mentality has to change.

– **WHAT DO YOU THINK NEEDS TO CHANGE IN THE INDUSTRY WHEN IT COMES TO ATTRACTING AND RETAINING DIVERSE ATTORNEYS?**

Top-down power dynamics have to change; beginning and end of story. But those dynamics won't change until we are proactively encouraging, facilitating and demanding that diverse and female professionals be captains of their respective ships of industry. It's a matter of changing both practice and perception.

– **WHAT, IF ANYTHING, GIVES YOU HOPE ABOUT THE LEGAL INDUSTRY ONE DAY ACHIEVING THAT VISION?**

Well, there was a time not long ago that Indian tech entrepreneurs couldn't get meaningful funding in Silicon Valley or elsewhere in the tech universe without a de facto white male sponsor. Today, being an Indian in the tech space is considered a plus. Is that prejudice? Sure, but it's a salutary kind of prejudice that is certainly better than its inverse, and that also demonstrates how shifting perception can shift practice and vice versa. However, when it comes to women, the picture isn't as encouraging. By way of illustration, only 14 out of 134 VC-backed "unicorns" (i.e. start-ups with capitalization of \$1 billion or more) in the U.S. have a co-founder who is a woman. Worldwide, it's 23 out of 239. Those ratios are outrageous and they should be infuriating. The pace of change is still far too slow to be tolerable, but this is a moment of acceleration, and if we can harness the moment to accelerate our demand to reshape power dynamics in the name of diversity, then there's plenty of reason to be hopeful.