

BLACK HISTORY, BLACK FUTURES WITH KATHY MARTIN AND TERRIE-LYNNE DEVONISH

Posted on February 23, 2023

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McMillan LLP is pleased to present our podcast series “Black History, Black Futures,” as part of our Black History Month commemoration. Each episode features an interview with a McMillan lawyer and a trailblazing Black leader in Canada’s business world.

In this episode, Kathy Martin, a Partner in our Financial Services Group, speaks with Terrie-Lynne Devonish, Chief Legal Officer & Corporate Secretary at the Altus Group, about overcoming stereotypes and the power of mentors and sponsors in professional development.

Transcript

Kathy Martin: Hello everyone and welcome to the third episode of McMillan's Black History Month podcast series in which we have been featuring trailblazing Black business leaders from a variety of sectors to discuss their experiences and path to success.

On behalf of McMillan and my colleagues in the Black Lawyers Affinity Group, I'm delighted to have as our guest today my friend, Terrie-Lynn Devonish, the Chief Legal Officer and Corporate Secretary at Altus Group, an industry leader in the real estate services and software space.

Terrie, welcome and thank you for taking the time to join me today.

Terrie-Lynne Devonish: Thank you, Kathy. It's good to see you as always and I appreciate being asked to do this. Looking forward to it.

Kathy Martin: Thank you. So let's get started. We'll jump right into it. You've served as the Chief Legal Officer and Corporate Secretary at Altus Group since 2021. Could you tell us a bit about the company and your role?

Terrie-Lynne Devonish: Happy to. So Altus Group, it's a great story for Canadians. It's a Canadian publicly traded company that really acts globally. We're in eight countries around the world, including US, UK, throughout Europe and Asia. Our main industry is the commercial real estate space. We're a data and analytics and we like to say an intelligent solutions provider. So we provide data and analytics and general intelligence to our clients in the commercial real estate space to really help them manage their risk and also help them with their assets, help them understand data to maximize returns.

My role in the company as Chief Legal Officer and Corporate Secretary is really to manage the legal program globally. So to understand, recognize and manage risk. And whenever I talk about risk, I like to say risk is also an opportunity. So it's to look for and help leverage those opportunities while at the same time manage risks that could be negative for the organization as well.

Kathy Martin: So when you think back to your time in law school, did you always know that you wanted to build a career in commercial law? And if you can talk a little bit about your career path.

Terrie-Lynne Devonish: To say career path, anytime I hear that word, I laugh because mine was more, and I'm sure many people are like this, was more of a winding road, which didn't always point to in the same direction. Sometimes it kind of did a full 180 or even maybe a 360. To go back a little bit, my parents were immigrants.

They came to Canada in the '60s. They had three kids, including me. And like most immigrants, I always say they were psychotic about education. We really had a number of choices. You could be a doctor or a lawyer or an accountant or a teacher. And I chose the door number two, which was the lawyer door. And I was thinking the other day, one of my early memories is we had a little keepsake book my parents had given us. And every year you could put in little memoirs and you could also write, you know, when I grow up, I want to be, and these are the '70s, so the choices were mommy or nurse. And my mother had written in lawyer.

So I was told I was going to be a lawyer and at some point I always like to joke and say they brainwashed me. So I went along just knowing I would always end up at law school. But in law school, I didn't have a sense right away of what I wanted to do. I remember a very good friend of mine knew from the get go, for example, criminal lawyer. He knew he wanted to do that. He became a very successful criminal lawyer and is now a judge. I didn't have that same experience in law school.

I found some of it interesting, some of it not so interesting, but came out without a really real sense of where I wanted to go and was given the very good advice to start off at a Bay Street firm because I would get lots of exposure and good training. And that was good advice. And that's certainly what happened.

And because I started off there, that's really where my experience, I was in a commercial setting, because that's the type of law that was being practiced at the firm I was at. I started off as a litigator doing a lot of financial services litigation for that sector. I ended up on a secondment for a client, which was a bank. And being going in that secondment and working in-house is where I really began to like that practicing in that area. And so that's really how I ended up there. From there, just different opportunities and different roles came along. And as I say, that's my winding road into commercial law and in-house work.

Kathy Martin: Yes, the road taken is not always the straight path. But as you were pursuing that path, were there any formative experiences early in your career that you would say played a significant role in who you are as a professional and as a leader today?

Terrie-Lynne Devonish: Certainly. When I think about formative experiences, they're not always positive. And unfortunately, given the time I was growing up in law, the experiences weren't always great. I was, for most lawyers that I worked with, the only, if not the only, then maybe one of few lawyers of color, certainly Black lawyers that they had ever worked with. I'm almost convinced and I've been told many times I was the first Black lawyer at the law firm I worked at.

And because of that, people had certain understandings or stereotyped beliefs about my capabilities, what I could do. Some people were just straight up uncomfortable, working with someone who didn't look like them, didn't have the same background. And those weren't great experiences. I remember, for example, a partner telling me I had had my hair natural and had it very low and I had twists. And a partner told me that it looked like my brains were squiggling out of my head. And at the time in your career, you have choices. You can tell them off, you can walk away and be angry, or you can think about your end goal and you want it to learn and grow and this is a partner giving you work and you realize you're just going to have to put that aside.

But what it made me realize, those kind of negative experiences, was that when I'm dealing with juniors, when I think about junior lawyers that I'm dealing with, I realize how much my words can have an impression and impact their career and their growing and their experiences. And I'm always so careful, even in those times you're frustrated and tired and I'm always so careful about my language and the impact of what I say as a senior lawyer on people.

And so those negative experiences have become positives for me because it's really shaped and made me realize that words and actions and treatment of those who work with, particularly juniors looking up to us, matter.

On the positive side, I remember my first, not necessarily formative, but my first general counsel role, big general counsel role. Like most of us, and many women anyway, we like to make sure that we know everything and we're 100% certain before we say things. And I would be sitting in executive meetings and only really

speaking when I was 100% sure of the subject matter and particularly if it was an area of expertise that I knew, in other words, law. And I remember a very senior woman who was running the Eastern Region sales came up to me and she said, you know, I think you're very bright. I can see your capability, but you're editing yourself. And she said, we didn't hire you here as our lawyer, just our lawyer. We want your business advisor and we're expecting you to advise and give your thoughts. You're now a business leader. And that advice just completely changed the way I thought about my role. And again, when I mentor and guide others, I encourage them.

I was just talking to Laura and my team about this today, about the fact that as he got more senior in his role, people are looking to you to give business advice, legal advice, but also business advice. And that's the value add of being in-house because you're living with your client, you know their business and they're looking for that advice as well. So those are some examples of some formative experiences. As I say, some negative, some positive, but both very beneficial, I think in my experience and certainly the way I practice and the way I manage people.

Kathy Martin: Those were great examples to see both the negative and the positive, and quite frankly, how it's been able to give you the opportunity to excel. So one of the questions that I'm really keen to find out about is, and when we talk about improving diversity in hiring practices, we seldom talk about supporting and retaining diverse talent, particularly women of color, as you've noted, although the conversation has been changing and shifting in recent years to retention. What are your views on that?

Terrie-Lynne Devonish: I heard someone say once, I wish I could remember who it was. So apologies, I'm not giving credit where credit is due, but hiring is very much, and this is the same for hiring from underrepresented groups. So these could be groups that are just not traditionally represented in our legal profession, whether it's Indigenous, racialized people, people from the LGBTQ community, people that are other abled. So it could go for people from those groups, but when you're hiring, it's almost like turning on a faucet.

And so the water is coming out and then unless there's something there to hold it, it's going to go down the drain and they're gone. But if you put a bowl under that faucet that doesn't have holes in it, that's well-constructed, now you've got a bowl of water that's there that can be used, that's together. And I think that's a nice analogy for the issues of retention. It's one thing to make sure you've got a diverse group of people on your roster as candidates to interview. It's another thing once those people come through the door to make sure that your programs, that your mentorship, that your sponsorship, that your opportunities are such that everyone is getting equity. Everyone's getting an equal chance. And what that means sometimes is that there are some groups who are not traditionally going to be given the same opportunities naturally.

You have to put programs in place to make sure there's equity. So maybe you have to have a special women's mentorship program or mentorship program for Black students or Black lawyers or other abled students or

Indigenous groups. But in order to achieve equity, we have to be deliberate about those programs to ensure that everyone is being promoted, retained, given all those opportunities, truly based on merit.

Otherwise, what happens is our natural biases take over and we tend to look to hire, promote and work with those that look like us. And that is often to the detriment of those who, as I say, have not traditionally been represented in our legal profession. So there has to be a deliberate program. I'm seeing more and more organizations do this, but I think particularly in law, we have a long way to go. The profession tends to be fairly conservative. Change comes sometimes hard.

People, as I say, just frankly have stereotyped thinking about certain groups, which leads them to not be able to trust that they can do the work. And unless we put deliberate programs in place, that's going to unfortunately shut the door on certain groups in our profession to the detriment of the profession. I remember someone saying once, you can't possibly have all of the best talent out there if all of your talent is being taken from the same place. It's just mathematically impossible. If you're getting everyone from the same schools and that look the same and have the same background, you're missing a whole whack of talent. Maybe you have to develop that talent differently. Maybe you have to think about it differently, but mathematically you can't possibly be getting the best of the best if you're only sourcing from one place. –

Kathy Martin: Yeah, you raised terrific points. And I think you touched on one, there's a growing recognition of the value of mentorship in promoting retention, which brings us to the next question. How important do you think mentorship is in creating diversity at the senior level? And what is your approach to mentorship?

Terrie-Lynne Devonish: I would say mentorship is important. It's not the be all end all, particularly when you get to the senior pieces. And I'm going to talk a bit about sponsorship, but let's turn to mentorship. I think mentorship is key. It's a way in my experience to really get a chance to learn and observe someone who has skills, experience that you have, and that it gives you an opportunity to emulate and learn from both the things that they have done incredibly well, but also things that they haven't done well, and that they've learned lessons that they can pass on to you.

So as a mentee, a good mentee mentor relationship means a mentee comes in with goals. I want to be promoted to this group. I want to learn to communicate more effectively. I want to learn to be a better advocate. I want to learn to build my client relationship or my going out and getting business. Looking for a mentor that can help you with whatever the areas that you want to help.

And it's a way for the mentee to learn, as I say, from their experiences, from their challenges and emulate that person. Incredibly important. And the mentor doesn't have to come from your office. Sometimes it's better that it's outside of your organization, but that relationship can really help you grow and help your skills, the soft skills. Sponsorship though, I think is also equally important. When a sponsor isn't guiding you, they're not

giving you advice, their job is really to be your advocate within the organization, to look for the growth, the stretch opportunities, as they say, opening the door for different projects or promotions, talking about you, talking you up to others who are in a decision making role.

For example, if you're a junior associate at a firm or you're, you know, say someone in my department and you want to get more exposure in front of senior people. The sponsor's job is to say, hey, have you heard about Kathy? She's doing a great job. I know you've got this project. Why don't you put her on and see how she does? I'll support her in the background, give her a chance to do this. That's the job of the sponsor. And again, that tends to happen. It's not programmatic. It tends to happen on an ad hoc basis. And in any diverse place of work, it's dangerous if it's done on an ad hoc basis, because again, people tend to just go to what's comfortable. And that might mean an exclusion of others who have great talent and skills.

And so having a deliberate sponsorship program to really benefit what we've been talking about, which is the promotion and retaining of diverse talent.

Kathy Martin: I'm a firm believer in that sponsorship piece. And it's funny, you're right, it happens ad hoc and it's behind the scenes. And someone may not even know that they're not being supported, but other things are going on behind the scene and someone else is getting that support, which is so critical in any career for advancements.

Terrie-Lynne Devonish: I have a story just quickly about a former boss of mine who was my first sponsor. And this is not very long ago. And she was just a wonderful sponsor of women and racialized women. And I remember a very senior executive who was promoted through the ranks and she was a sponsor, an advocate to promote this woman onto the executive. And there were others who said, oh, I think she's got gaps in her skills. And I remember the CEO saying to me, I turned to those people and I said, well, you had gaps when you were promoted, but that didn't stop us because we knew you had the ability to grow into the role. And so why is it any different?

And I thought that's a perfect example of the challenge that often faced racialized people, people from equity seeking groups, women, because the expectation is you've got to be at this really high or higher level to take these roles on while others who aren't in those groups don't have to be. And it's often a human made barrier to promoting diverse talent.

So again, the sponsorship programs, I agree with you, are very important.

Kathy Martin: So onto our final question, and this one is regarding advice. And I've certainly received some terrific advice from you over the years. I'm thinking as far back as student recruitment process.

Terrie-Lynne Devonish: That's a long time ago.

Kathy Martin: Yes.

Terrie-Lynne Devonish: We were just babies. Child prodigies.

Kathy Martin: What's the best piece of advice you've received in your career? And did you follow it?

Terrie-Lynne Devonish: Oh my goodness. I've had some great pieces of advice. One I would say is the one I was told by the woman in business who said to me, you know, you are as general counsel and as a legal advisor, particularly when you're in house, you're more than just a legal advisor. You were a business advisor. I think that was great.

The other one, and this is in the realm of I think the person who gave me this advice didn't necessarily, wasn't always necessarily someone that was used to working with talent that was diverse or racialized people. But I think when he told me this, I don't know what he meant, but it was great advice, which was, I remember this is when I was a litigator. It was my first time going into court by myself. And this partner turned to me and said, I want you to remember, given the way you look, judges will never forget you. You are going to be the only Black person in the room and people won't forget you.

And I thought that's great advice because it can work two ways, right? If you're not ready and prepared and you make a mistake, no one's going to forget. Conversely, if you knock it out of the park, they're not going to forget. So that can be, that can work to one's advantage as well. So I thought, again, never really understood why that advice was given to me, but it was good advice.

Kathy Martin: And clearly it was taken to heart and it's worked well for you based on where you are today. So terrific. Wow. We went through those questions so quickly. Terrie, thank you again for sharing these very important insights about your amazing journey. I'm sure that your story will serve as an inspiration for young women and men out there that are considering a career in law.

Terrie-Lynne Devonish: Thank you. It's great to talk to you and always good to see you. And your story is equally interesting and inspirational, and I'm just glad we got this chance to talk again.

Kathy Martin: Oh, absolutely. Thank you. And I just want to make a closing note. I'd like to encourage everyone to the extent that you haven't had an opportunity to check out the earlier podcasts that you do so. And we'd very much like to thank our audience for being a part of this Black History Month initiative. I will end in saying that until next time, let's keep these very important conversations going and keep striving for excellence. Bye for now.