

# PUBLICATION

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## Advancing Inclusivity with "BakerNextGen," Baker Donelson's Inaugural CEO Sponsorship Group

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*By Suneel "Neel" Gupta*

**When Baker Donelson launched its Diversity Initiative in 2002, a primary goal was to increase the number of minority attorneys in the Firm, which was accomplished. Along the way, however, we discovered that attracting diverse attorneys to join the Firm was only one piece of the puzzle – the more challenging piece was engaging and retaining diverse attorneys. Mentoring has always been a fundamental part of the Firm's training and retention program, but recently, Baker Donelson CEO Tim Lupinacci took mentoring one step further by launching the CEO sponsorship group, BakerNextGen.**

"What's the difference between mentoring and sponsoring?" An article from Stanford's National Accelerator Lab sums it up best: a mentor *advises* you, whereas a sponsor *advocates* for you. A sponsor is typically a senior-level person within an organization who has "pull." The sponsor is invested in a protégé's career and success, they advise the protégé on their career vision, they tap their protégé into their network, and they increase their protégé's visibility internally and externally. Mentors, on the other hand, are typically more consultative and do not have to hold a senior-level position. Most attorneys in the BakerNextGen group mentor other Baker Donelson attorneys, but none have been part of a formalized sponsor relationship.

The BakerNextGen program aims to empower and engage diverse attorneys in new ways, provide them with the tools and guidance necessary to navigate and grow their practices, make connections across the Firm, and position them for leadership opportunities within the Firm. These efforts are critical steps in keeping diverse talent. The inaugural BakerNextGen group includes three shareholders and associates. Tim has monthly one-on-one conference calls with each member to discuss opportunities, challenges, business development, and other ways he can help. The BakerNextGen members meet as a group every other month to discuss their practices and challenges. Tim provides insights during the meetings and then follows up with each member to learn the steps they are taking to further their career plans and advance their goals. His individual discussions with the members also focus on potential leadership opportunities and barriers that he can help to remove.

Recently, Tim invited BakerNextGen members to Chattanooga for training and to participate in a meeting with the Firm's leadership. This opportunity served to increase the visibility of the members and broaden their networks. Recognizing that business development is key to a successful career, the members participated in a half-day business development coaching program conducted by GrowthPlay. Since their meeting in Chattanooga, group members began individual monthly coaching sessions with GrowthPlay consultants to help them focus on building their books of business. According to GrowthPlay principals Alycia Sutor and Toni Wells, "Baker Donelson is committed to the development and success of its talent and that commitment is demonstrated by the leaders and business professionals who continually seek opportunities to engage, educate and inspire."

Diverse in-house counsel and those in private practice share the similar challenge of navigating colleagues and business units within their organizations. Therefore, diverse in-house counsel would similarly benefit from an internal sponsor who has "pull" and is committed to the success of the company's diverse talent. Indeed, a

work environment that creates pathways to success for diverse attorneys in fresh and interactive ways are critical, particularly a program like BakerNextGen that is led by the organization's CEO.

Baker Donelson CEO Tim Lupinacci said, "I fundamentally believe that we have to provide clear pathways to success at Baker Donelson for all our lawyers, including our diverse lawyers. Through this sponsorship, I can guarantee direct, personal involvement with our diverse lawyers to ensure they have the same career-elevating experiences and opportunities that non-diverse lawyers have, including a path towards becoming a shareholder, an equity owner and a Firm leader. Based on personal experience and supported research, I am confident that an effective sponsorship program starting from the top at Baker Donelson will result in meaningful and lasting impact."

Like Tim, the BakerNextGen group is hopeful that being intentional about creating such sponsorship opportunities for diverse talent is a step in the right direction to truly advance diversity and inclusion in the profession.

*Suneel "Neel" Gupta, a former Baker Donelson Shareholder, was also a BakerNextGen member; he now serves as assistant deputy general counsel with Norfolk Southern.*