

By Joe Patrice

Dentons is the largest law firm in the world, so it shouldn't come as a shock that it would eventually find itself on the wrong end of a harassment claim. Not that firm size excuses bad behavior by any means, it's just that statistics would suggest a #MeToo moment was inevitable. And, indeed, it's already happened. But as easy as it is to blame the firm when these allegations surface, firms can't always control for every bad actor that might walk through their doors.

What they can control is their response to the situation.

Yesterday, Krunali Parekh, a Business Development Specialist at Dentons, filed suit in New York state court alleging a pattern of sexual harassment by Alton Delane, the Managing Director of Dentons' Venture Technology Group. You know the complaint — available here — is damning when there's just a page of bullet points like these:

- *Professing to Ms. Parekh that he is "in love with her."*
- *Telling Ms. Parekh that "I want to fuck you."*
- *Asking Ms. Parekh if she "ever wondered what it's like to be with a Black guy?"*
- *Asking Ms. Parekh if she "ever thought of being with me?"*
- *Telling Ms. Parekh: "I want to stick my dick up your ass."*
- *Asking Ms. Parekh if she "ever had anal sex?"*
- *Telling Ms. Parekh: "I want to fuck you in the asshole."*

And those are *less than half* the bullet points! It's safe to say these allegations advance far beyond the realm of screwball misunderstandings. The complaint alleges that alcohol contributed to Delane's behavior, which would seem to support the decision some firms have made to phase out "boozefests" — though these allegations suggest that would just be passing the buck because Parekh claims alcohol was just a convenient excuse for, rather than the cause of, Delane's alleged behavior.

Bringing us back to the original point — what does a firm like Dentons do when confronted with allegations like this. In a statement, the firm explained that it's put Delane on administrative leave and is taking the matter seriously:

Dentons has a robust Code of Conduct, which includes a discrimination and retaliation prevention policy and we are deeply troubled by the allegations against a non-lawyer employee, which are contrary to our values and culture of respect. We take any concern about discrimination or unfair treatment seriously. The Firm is committed to a workplace free from discrimination and harassment, and to fostering an inclusive and diverse culture. Upon first learning of the detailed allegations through threatened litigation, Dentons placed the individual who is the subject of these allegations on administrative leave while we continued an ongoing investigation. Upon conclusion of the investigation, we are committed to taking appropriate and additional action as necessary.

We are proud of the many women in global leadership positions in our Firm, including the five women who sit on our 16 member US Board, and our industry leading commitment to diversity and inclusion.

That's exactly what a firm should do when faced with allegations like this. Unfortunately, the complaint claims that Dentons wasn't always as eager to address harassment as they are in the wake of this suit:

Though Dentons is doubtlessly aware that the anti-discrimination laws in place are intended to encourage women to speak out about these abuses and that there has been a broad societal push towards empowering women, when Ms. Parekh raised complaints about this conduct to her supervisor and to Human Resources, she was simply told “**do not discuss this with anyone else inside or outside the firm.**”

That allegation would seem to undermine that “robust Code of Conduct.” Obviously, we don't have the full context. If the quote were “do not discuss this with anyone else inside or outside the firm... until we conclude our thorough investigation and report back to you” that direction would be entirely prudent. We'll find out more about this in discovery, but it's worth remembering there's a possible innocent interpretation here and the truth needs to get fleshed out.

Even though this behavior doesn't involve any lawyers, it reaffirms the importance of driving a nail in the practice many firms have employed of forcing employees into mandatory arbitration and shady nondisclosure agreements. As Parekh notes in the complaint, one of her goals in the suit is to increase awareness that law firms aren't immune to harassing behavior, and coming to grips with that is the first step in dealing with it effectively.

Hopefully the rest of the Biglaw world is getting the message.