

# WORKING MOTHER

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**Walking into Chris Marston's** office for a coaching session two years ago, Nikki Reid was nervous. The KPMG partner had volunteered to prep her for interviews for the internal job she was being considered for, but she worried that Chris would say she was a long shot (discouraging) or, white guy to African-American woman, he'd "coddle" her with vague praise (even more disheartening).

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Neither of those things happened.

Instead, Chris gave her candid insights and a strategy. Most of all, she recalls, once he knew the ins and outs of her background and skills, "he kept drilling into my head, 'You deserve a seat at this table.'"

Nikki landed the position: managing director in KPMG's federal advisory practice, based in metro Washington, DC. Today Chris is officially one of Nikki's sponsors.

When it comes to advancing women of color, that kind of partnership is exactly what works. In a recent survey of 1,181 multicultural women, the Working Mother Research Institute found that respondents with a mentor or sponsor were more likely to be satisfied, put forth their best effort and be loyal to their employer than those without. (Survey data presented here is from *The Status of Men as Allies for Multicultural Women: The Working Mother Report*; for more results, visit [workingmother.com/Allies](http://workingmother.com/Allies).)

KMPG and the rest of this year's Best Companies for Multicultural Women are ahead of the pack in building a culture where people put aside differences to focus on common goals.

"When we develop anyone, and most especially women and people from historically underrepresented groups, it makes all of us smarter," says Je Oak, senior vice president, corporate responsibility and development at Bon Secours Health System, a Marriottsville, MD-based Catholic healthcare organization. "Diversity opens up different ways to approach problems, different ways to think about situations."

Here are four stories of male leaders at the 2017 Best Companies for Multicultural Women who've allied with talented women of color—and what everyone has gained as a result.

**Kristal Diaz-Rojas**, partnership leader, IBM and Apple. Mom to Rahul, 8, and Sebastian, 4  
Sponsor: **Bob Edge**, director, IBM System

**Their story:** Bob met Kristal 16 years ago when she was a summer intern earning an industrial engineering degree. Impressed by her drive, energy and skills, he recruited her after she graduated. Over the years, Bob has prepped Kristal with mock interviews and helped her secure a really big assignment (helping reposition a 400-person manufacturing facility) and her first overseas role (two years, in Singapore). "Our partnership has always been about how to navigate IBM," says Kristal.

**What she's gained:** "In my Hispanic community, we're uncomfortable with self-promotion. Bob has helped me learn to talk about myself and what I've done with purpose. In an organization as large as IBM, it's important to be able to do that."

**What he's gained:** Someone who can extend the company's commitment to developing diverse employees. Bob's responsible for the global delivery of IBM hardware and sponsors a dozen female engineers around the world. Recently, he asked Kristal to mentor a high-potential young woman in Mexico. "I'm committed to developing technical women as role models," he says. "As a global company, we want to represent the best and brightest."

**Advice for others:** Maintain the relationship. "It's a shared responsibility," says Bob. "Set up the appointments, then come prepared to discuss your path or with a coaching question." Kristal and Bob connect ad hoc (they use instant messaging), and formally at least once a quarter. "My ambition is an executive role, so we map out the skills I have and the ones I need to gain," she says.

**Survey says:** Multicultural women are just as likely as men of all races to aspire to senior management positions or become CEO.

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**Sonia Spinks**, director of planning and allocation, home lines, Bentonville, AR-based Sam's Club (a division of Wal-Mart Stores). Mom to Daniel, 6, Sarah, 5, and Andrew, 1  
Sponsor: **Todd Owen**, senior director of planning and allocation for Sam's Club

**Their story:** Todd and Sonia met at an internal leadership-essentials class when Todd was working for the Wal-Mart division; later, Sonia worked in an engineering support role on a technical project for Todd's group. When Todd took a senior position at Sam's Club, he went to the senior vice president with responsibility for the business and endorsed Sonia, a candidate whose background as a process engineer was not traditional for a merchandising role. "I said: 'Listen, I've got some blind spots, and Sonia brings strengths in those areas. Together, we'd make a stronger team.'" He was right. Their group reworked a line review process, implementing new cross-functional systems. Today, it's the most efficient preseason process group (they decide what items to buy and in what quantities) in Sam's Club.

**What she's gained:** "Any time in those first months that I wasn't sure, or my confidence got hurt, I would go back to that true north: Todd selected me to bring my unique skills to achieve this purpose. So it's OK if I'm seeing things or sometimes thinking differently than everyone else."

**What he's gained:** Greater awareness. For example, when Sonia saw a male co-worker being inappropriate toward a female colleague, Sonia flagged the situation to Todd. He took action with the individual. And he followed up with Sonia. He recalls: "I said, 'Thanks for telling me,' and since she'd opened that door, I said, 'Let's talk about me. Am I doing anything in terms of race or gender that isn't inclusive?'" Her feedback "absolutely made me a better manager," Todd says.

**Expert insight:** What Todd did is a best practice. There is "no time stamp on inclusion," notes Dnika J. Travis, Ph.D., vice president and center leader of the Catalyst Research Center for Corporate Practice. "It's important for managers to know they can always follow up to discuss something they heard, saw or did, even if it's days or weeks later."

**Survey says:** Todd's exemplary, but a rarity. Among multicultural women surveyed, only 39 percent say their company encourages dialogue about gender, and 35 percent say the same about race. Eighty-one percent say male peers would be more effective if they understood the workplace barriers multicultural women face.

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**Nikki Reid**, managing director, KPMG's federal advisory practice. Mom to Justin Jr., 5, Ashe, 3, and a baby on the way  
Sponsor: **Chris Marston**, partner, advisory principal, and advisory industry leader for the federal government practice, KPMG

**Their story:** When he volunteered for their first coaching session, Chris read Nikki's business case, studied her resume and talked to people who'd previously worked with her. That level of commitment to sponsorship blew Nikki away. It paved the way for honest conversations, which have benefited both their careers. Recently, Nikki advocated for an extraordinary performer on her team—a woman who'd taken time off and come back—to receive an out-of-cycle raise. "She presented the case, and I pushed back," Chris recalls. "I didn't have a line of sight into this professional's work, but Nikki made the case so compellingly that ultimately, I agreed with her. This was the right decision. It absolutely sends the right message about our performance culture."

**What she's gained:** A sounding board and a backer who reaffirms that her perspective is valued. When she needs help, there's no penalty in asking. "It's not a sign of weakness. I don't even have to take his advice," she says. "When I need something, he presents me with the building blocks, but he's not building the castle for me, or telling me how it has to look."

**What he's gained:** A rainmaker—right away, Nikki helped the practice win two large clients.

**Expert insight:** Chris and Nikki are getting it right. "People want a balance between authenticity and inclusion," says Catalyst's Travis. "They want to be valued for their true selves, and they want to feel like they belong."

**Survey says:** Seventy-five percent of multicultural women say that it would be helpful to have senior management (like Chris) open to different styles of workplace leadership.

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**Anjali Mulchandani-West**, director, corporate responsibility, Bon Secours Health System. Mom to Demetri, 11  
Sponsor: **Jeff Oak**, senior vice president, corporate responsibility and development, Bon Secours

**Their story:** Two years ago, Jeff recruited Anjali with a promise she'd be able to grow further at a bigger enterprise. "He said he would search for appropriate opportunities for me."

**What she's gained:** Exposure to senior management. Within six months of her joining, he put her in charge of a small team overseeing a high-risk situation. He also got her a spot in a yearlong development program for 80 high-potential employees, selected out of roughly 26,000 total employees.

**What he's gained:** Someone who has performed extremely well in a difficult situation and has represented him well to executive leadership.

**Advice to others:** This kind of support is "a two-way street. You have to contribute real value to expect someone to reciprocate as a sponsor," says Anjali.

**Survey says:** Seventy-nine percent of sponsored multicultural women had been given a challenging new assignment in the past 24 months.

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