

DIVERSITY

Dialogues

One-on-one with Alia Razzaq, Chief Clerk of the New York City Civil Court



On Diversity:

I encourage people to respect that we are all citizens of the world and we might come from different cultural backgrounds, we might come from different communities, we may have different religions, we may not have religions at all, to be respectful. I'd say to be respectful.

Susan Goodman: So Alia, what three words would you use to describe your current role?

Alia Razzaq: Fast-paced. Detail-oriented. Communication.

Susan Goodman: Can you elaborate on one or more of those?

Alia Razzaq: Yes. I'll start with communication. In addition to having a responsibility to communicate or delegate the necessary communications to the public, I also serve my principals, who are the Administrative Judge and Deputy Chief Administrative Judge and the higher-ups in the Office of Court Administration. I serve the employees who are our subordinates. It's necessary for me to communicate and, in my opinion, communicate skillfully, ensuring that I transmit messages that are understood and/or directions that are understood and followed.

Susan Goodman: Do you want to talk about fast-paced, because that sounds like it's kind of a corollary to what you were just talking about.

Alia Razzaq: Fast-paced, similar to the world outside. The needs of the court are ever-changing. In the interest of excellence and supporting and following Judge DiFiore's Excellence Initiative, we are trying to stay as up-to-date as we can with technology while meeting the needs of the court users and providing access to justice.

There are laws that require us, on occasion, to change procedure and transmit that information to any of our necessary personnel. Our staffing continues to change. We're in a court where we have competitive employees. We're happy and proud when they are promoted but when they are, they leave a vacancy. There are also people that are retiring, and we still have to adjust when there's attrition for whatever reason... to stay on top of things and ensure that we're accurate. On our civil side, calendars are overloaded, and so to get through a regular workday, we need to move with speed, efficiency and accuracy.

Susan Goodman: Great. That's very compactly said and interesting. What would you say you like most about your job and what are you most passionate about what you do?

Alia Razzaq: I would say on a regular day, Alia is an introvert. However, my work and responsibilities make me an introverted extrovert. One of my favorite parts of the job is talking to people. As I was promoted within civil court, the higher rank I was promoted to, the less my interaction with people, especially court users. So, what I miss the most is the people. I started in the court at a window services assignment and I fancy myself an expert at that and enjoyed people walking away satisfied with the service. When people enter into a court as a petitioner, respondent, plaintiff, or defendant, chances are someone's going to win this and someone's going to lose this and either way it goes, to be able to do that and receive services with respect and dignity, whether it's an allegation that you owe rent or someone is suing you for money, or you have to recover something from someone, on either side, my feelings are the person is entitled to respect, and dignity and I'd like to see that they get that.

Susan Goodman: Great. Just moving to the whole topic of diversity. How would you define diversity in your own words? How do you encourage people to honor their own uniqueness?

Alia Razzaq: I encourage people to respect that we are all citizens of the world and respect that, as citizens of the world, we might come from different cultural backgrounds, we might come from different communities, we may have different religions, we may not have religions at all, to be respectful. I'd say to be respectful.

Susan Goodman: And how do you encounter it on a day-to-day basis in your own work?

Alia Razzaq: In my own work, ... I would say in the past I've encountered an expectation that I fit two minorities and therefore there were no expectations of me at all. I followed through with showing that I'm a hard worker. If I don't know the answer, I'm going to provide the answer. And have had people who have had that thought come back to me and say they were wrong. And that was good for me. That was good for my colleagues.

Susan Goodman: Have you had any mentors that have been particularly important to you along the way?

Alia Razzaq: I look at every person that I was subordinate to as a mentor in some sort of way, whether I observed and made an unqualified assessment at the time of their professional behavior as something that I wouldn't do if I ever was promoted, or if I were in their shoes how I would handle something. I've had great mentors in the form of managers or supervisors who neither they nor I felt that I was going to promote to this position but just in teaching, in sharing, have given me so much. I was able to give ideas and they were considered. I volunteered and was successful. I was able to liaison not just between criminal court and civil court but with the outside agencies: the Center for Court Innovation, New York City Housing Authority, and the Red Hook Community Justice Center.

Susan Goodman: Since you have risen and succeeded so well within the court system, how would you advise prospective applicants to the court system and/or those who wish to advance within it?

Alia Razzaq: What I would advise is to: Learn your duties and your responsibilities and become proficient in them. Whether it's communicating with the public, moving papers and processing warrants or judgments. Whatever your job is, do it well. In regard to communicating with people, just imagine that each and every communication we have at work is an interview. You are showing who you are to that panel or to that person that might be selecting you for a job. You never know who you're speaking to and when you're going to meet them again. And for that reason, it's always important to put your best foot forward. Give your best you. Working in the courts where, again, when people walk into the building—whether they're a petitioner, respondent, plaintiff, defendant, it's quite possible that there's something they might lose. And we don't often know the people on the other side of the window. There are people that are anxious and their tone may be, on occasion, a little challenging, but it's not personal. There's nothing personal there and so it's up to us to be empathetic, to be understanding, to be patient and to hear what's going on with the person on the other side of the window.

Susan Goodman: That's great advice.

Alia Razzaq: And then lastly for me, I share with my staff that I might in some other environment be called nosey, but when I'm at work and being introduced to a new assignment, I term myself as professionally curious. It's important for me to learn, not just what my role is, and without stepping on the toes of my colleagues, learn what's going on around me. I didn't want to pigeon-hole myself into one assignment, and it has helped me to learn what's going on around me. It helped me to volunteer if there's a project going on.

Also, if you have a hidden talent, though we might not be able to utilize it on any given Wednesday morning, when we're trying to resolve crowds in our waiting areas and lobbies, we're always open to suggestion. I think that if you have a background where you're into digital technology, for example, and you realize that we're way behind the times and have some ideas, please submit them.

Susan Goodman: That's well said. And finally, before you leave this position, what would you like your greatest achievement to be?

Alia Razzaq: I would say communicating to anyone that's interested that this seat that I'm sitting in is achievable for anyone and I believe that I achieved it by working hard, by communicating well, and nothing is impossible. I started in the court system as a grade 16. I spent the majority of my career right here at civil court. As employees, we owe it to ourselves to seek out each and every promotional opportunity that exists. We owe it to our families. And at the end of the day when we retire, the higher you are promoted, the better it is for you. The end game is better.

Susan Goodman: That's great. I really appreciate your talking to us today, Alia. It was very inspiring to hear what you had to say.