



B1: No Blueprint, No Problem: Breaking Ceilings with Soy, Sazón, & Soul

California Minority Counsel Program

2026 Annual Business Conference

Date & Time: Friday, September 25, 2026, 4:15 p.m.–5:30 p.m.

Location: UCLA Meyer & Renee Luskin Conference Center, 425 Westwood Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095

CA MCLE Credit: 1.25 Hours – General MCLE Credit

Session Description

For many first-generation attorneys, there is no inherited roadmap—no playbook for navigating law firm partnership, in-house leadership, or the unspoken rules of the profession. At the same time, systemic barriers and other forms of underrepresentation continue to shape who advances—and who is left navigating alone.

This session brings together diverse voices across the legal profession to explore how first-generation lawyers—particularly from Black, Latino, Asian American, and other underrepresented communities—are not only breaking barriers, but redefining success on their own terms. With “soy, sazón & soul” as a metaphor for cultural identity, resilience, and authenticity, panelists will share how lived experiences can become a strategic advantage in leadership, business development, and career advancement.

Through candid storytelling and practical insights, this conversation will move beyond inspiration to strategy—equipping attendees with tools to navigate spaces that weren’t designed for them, while building pathways for those who follow.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this session, attendees should be able to:

- Identify the unwritten rules, unspoken norms, and systemic barriers that shape law firm culture, partnership tracks, and in-house leadership pipelines—particularly as they affect first-generation and underrepresented attorneys.

-
- Recognize how first-generation lived experiences rooted in Black, Latino, Asian American, and other underrepresented communities can be leveraged as strategic professional assets—including resourcefulness, adaptability, language skills, and cultural fluency.
 - Apply practical strategies for building authentic visibility, credibility, and business development opportunities early in a legal career.
 - Distinguish between mentorship and sponsorship and identify concrete steps for cultivating sponsor relationships and professional networks in spaces not originally designed for first-generation attorneys.
 - Evaluate institutional practices and organizational changes that can widen access and advancement for attorneys from underrepresented backgrounds.
 - Develop a personal action plan with concrete next steps for career advancement, network-building, and professional development.

Moderator and Panelists

Moderator:

- Melissa Vasquez-Myers, Partner, Fragomen, Del Rey, Bernsen & Loewy, LLP

Panelists:

- Alyssa Koo, Managing Counsel, PG&E
- Warrington Parker, Partner and Managing Partner of the San Francisco Office, Crowell & Moring LLP
- Andres Cantero Jr., Associate, Real Estate, Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP
- Hon. Wesley L. Hsu, U.S. District Judge, U.S. District Court for the Central District of California

Substantive Topical Outline

Subtopic 1 – First-Generation Pathways and Professional Identity

First-generation attorneys often enter the profession without a family roadmap for choosing a practice area, understanding firm economics, or navigating professional norms. This subtopic explores how the panelists' backgrounds, family expectations, and early career experiences shaped their paths into law and their definitions of success.

Discussion Questions:

- Why did you decide to become a lawyer, and what has your journey been like up to this point?
- Looking back, what is something you wish someone had told you during your first year of practice?

Subtopic 2 – Unwritten Rules and Systemic Barriers

Every professional environment has unspoken norms that govern credibility, work allocation, and advancement. For first-generation and underrepresented attorneys, these invisible rules can be especially difficult to identify. This subtopic examines the hidden codes of the profession—including the distinctive expectations of big law—and how attorneys have learned to recognize and navigate them.

Discussion Questions:

- What unwritten rule of the profession did you have to learn the hard way?
- What are some of the unspoken rules of lawyering in big law?

Subtopic 3 – Imposter Syndrome and Authentic Leadership

Imposter syndrome can affect attorneys at every career stage, and its effects are often amplified by first-generation or underrepresented identity. At the same time, the pressure to conform to inherited leadership models can conflict with the values and lived experiences that distinguish first-generation attorneys. This subtopic addresses both challenges and the ways authenticity can support effective leadership.

Discussion Questions:

- Have you ever experienced imposter syndrome? If so, what helped you work through it?
- How do you balance authenticity with the pressure to conform to traditional leadership expectations?

Subtopic 4 – Sponsorship, Visibility, and Network-Building

Mentors provide guidance, while sponsors use their influence to create opportunities and advocate for advancement. For first-generation attorneys who may lack access to traditional professional networks, understanding this distinction—and building authentic visibility—can be transformative. This subtopic explores practical approaches to cultivating sponsor relationships and building influence without compromising personal or cultural values.

Discussion Questions:

- How have you built relationships with sponsors, not just mentors, especially when you did not already have access to traditional networks?
- How can first-generation attorneys build influence and visibility without feeling like they are constantly self-promoting?

Subtopic 5 – Path-Specific Insights: Judiciary and In-House

The legal profession offers distinct career tracks—including the judiciary and in-house practice—each with its own unwritten expectations and entry points. For first-generation attorneys, charting a path to the bench or making the transition in-house often requires guidance that is not readily available. This subtopic provides practical, path-specific insights for attendees considering these trajectories.

Discussion Questions:

- For lawyers who aspire to the bench someday, what steps can they take early in their career to build the network and reputation that they need?
- What advice would you give a first-generation attorney who wants to go in-house but doesn't know where to start?

Resources and Citations

The following resources provide relevant frameworks and context for the topics addressed in this session.

California State Bar – MCLE Provider Rules and Guidance

- State Bar of California, Rules Governing Minimum Continuing Legal Education for Members of the State Bar of California (Title 3, Division 5, Chapter 1)

Professional Organizations

- California Minority Counsel Program (CMCP) – cmcp.org
- CMCP Member Directory – cmcp.org/membership/members/
- CMCP Sponsorship Opportunities – cmcp.org/cmcp-sponsorship/

Additional Resources

- American Bar Association, “The Transformative Power of Mentorship for First-Generation Lawyers” (Sept. 24, 2024), https://www.americanbar.org/groups/young_lawyers/resources/tyl/professional-development/transformative-power-of-mentorship-for-first-generation-lawyers/
- American Bar Association, “Strategies for Effective Mentorship and Sponsorship” (Aug. 14, 2019), https://www.americanbar.org/groups/young_lawyers/resources/tyl/diversity/sstrategies-effective-mentorship-and-sponsorship/
- National Association for Law Placement, “First Gen Graduates of Color Face Largest Entry-Level Employment Gaps” (Dec. 2025), <https://www.nalp.org/1225research>
- American Bar Association, “Diversity Data for the Legal Profession,” https://www.americanbar.org/groups/diversity/resources/goal3-reports/demographic_trends_in_the_legal_profession

These materials are intended for educational purposes in connection with the 2026 CMCP Annual Business Conference. They do not constitute legal advice. The views expressed by panelists are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of their employers, the California Minority Counsel Program, or any sponsoring organization.