

## Diversity in Practice *where the future starts*

December 2008  
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*Imagination is more important than knowledge. For while knowledge defines all we currently know and understand, imagination points to all we might yet discover and create. ~ Albert Einstein*



It is all but impossible to talk about diversity these days without talking about President-Elect Barack Obama's historical election as our nation's 44<sup>th</sup> President. As my husband and I wandered through Grant Park with our children on the evening of November 4<sup>th</sup>, we heard the phrases "making history" and "never thought I would see this day" uttered by people of all races, genders, and ages. These phrases dominated the media coverage throughout the evening of the election and into the days that followed. Obama's journey has indeed changed our history, and I fully believe that many people never expected to see the reality that he now represents; however, this narrative of making history and defying expectations misses the true power of his achievement.

Barack Obama's candidacy and his campaign asked and required this nation to step outside what we know and believe in what we can imagine. Although knowledge is reliable, it is limited because it is based in history. Although imagination feels less reliable, it is the only place where the future can begin. Obama's election did not make history. It made the future. It did not defy expectations. It delivered assurance that we can base our expectations on what can be instead of what has already been.

Diversity and inclusion have often relied on history and expectations to make the case for why change is necessary. We have focused on past discrimination and current challenges to predetermine the shape of the future. We try to articulate what our workplaces can look like by studying what we already know and how we can change that which we know. We have not truly considered that creating what has not yet existed may be far better than merely changing what we know. Perhaps the greatest lesson we can extract from this historical election is that diversity is far more connected to our imagination of what is ideal and possible than it is to our expectations of what is realistic and probable.

When I work with clients on strategic plans for their diversity and inclusion efforts, we inevitably begin with an assessment of their current situations and market realities. Then, we progress to discussing their goals and objectives. Finally, we create strategies that will enhance their ability to increase diversity and inclusion within the framework of what they deem to be possible. Although I push my clients to be visionary in setting their goals and ambitious in stretching their capabilities, I do wonder how different these strategic plans would look if imagination, instead of an assessment, inspired the objectives.

Similarly, imagination is equally critical to those of us who do not see ourselves represented in the roles we aspire to play. Reality reflects the challenges, but our imagination defines the possibilities. Diversity and inclusion require active imagination by both the historically included and the historically excluded. We have to be able to imagine how difference can be equal before we can be different and equal.

I do not intend to suggest that imagination alone creates change. Obama's campaign has been credited with being one of the most strategic, disciplined and well-executed political campaigns in modern politics, yet, even as the campaign was run with pragmatic efficiency, the candidate invited us to move beyond presumptions to possibility. It is at this intersection of imagination and execution where diversity and inclusion can transition from statistics and initiatives to workplace values and realities.

I do recognize the inherent challenge in asking lawyers to integrate imagination into our very analytical models of thinking about the world around us. We are, after all, a profession that relies on precedence. Diversity, however, cannot be based on precedence because none exists. Analysis is required for understanding the past, but imagination is required for creating the future. As Mark Twain so eloquently opined, "you cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus." If we act only on what we see, we limit ourselves to recreating what we already know. Sight requires imagination to become vision.

So, as we reflect on diversity and inclusion in 2008 and plan for 2009, perhaps we can offer imagination a seat at the table along with assessment, precedence, strategy and budget. We may still get there without imagination, but only with imagination will we know exactly where we want to go.