

Diversity in Practice *the importance of why*

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For the past decade, I have seen legal workplaces set ambitious goals and create well-crafted plans that are designed to move them into a more diverse and inclusive future. There is initial excitement and sincere commitment, but instead of the workplaces evolving into greater diversity and inclusion, the goals and plans often devolve to fit in with the way the workplaces have always worked.

Why doesn't the sustainability of workplace efforts on diversity and inclusion measure up to the intensity of the initial excitement? Organizations are getting better at setting goals, and they have improved the quality of the plans crafted to achieve those goals. The *what* and the *how* are in place and better than ever, but the gravitational pull of the status quo seems to be stronger than our resolve to move beyond it. Why is that?

When we want to create change, we need to know *what* we want to change and *how* we plan to change it, but the *what* and the *how* need a well articulated *why* before they can affect the desired change. The *why* is the motivation behind the resolution, the fuel that will keep the efforts moving forwards after the excitement of making the resolution fades. The *why* for the change has to be stronger than the pull of the status quo, and the *why* for diversity and inclusion, in particular, has to inspire a majority of people in the workplace to do things differently than they have done in the past.

If you ask different people in the legal profession (as I have often!) why they want greater diversity and inclusion in their workplaces, you will most often get generic answers like "it is the right thing to do" or "our clients are asking for diversity." If you push them further on these answers and ask "what does right thing to do mean" or "would you still care about diversity if your clients weren't asking for it," you will quickly discover that the *why* of diversity and inclusion has not received the attention necessary to serve as a strong foundation for the *what* and the *how*.

As you ponder your own or your organization's commitment and efforts in diversity and inclusion, ask yourself *why* this issue is important to you.

Is diversity in your organization about removing barriers or creating special programs for the underrepresented? The former is the right thing to do because it ensures equal opportunity for every individual. The latter is an insult to talented people. Do you truly believe that diverse perspectives create better results or are you focused on simply completing checklists requested by clients and recruits? The former is a business case, and the latter is a motive that cannot fight the pull of the status quo for very long. Are you only discussing the benefits of diversity and inclusion or are you also talking about the costs of not being diverse and inclusive? The former gets you moving in the right direction, but the latter keeps you moving in that direction in a sustainable way.

Articulating a compelling and persuasive *why* for diversity and inclusion is the most critical step to creating a diverse and inclusive workplace. A *why* that can drive real change includes both a candid assessment of the benefits of making that change as well as an unflinching evaluation of the costs of not making that change. If the majority of people in your organization are not yet fully persuaded on the *why*, your resolutions for 2009 should focus on creating a dialogue that gets them there. Without this solid foundation, all other programming will result in change that eerily resembles the status quo.

When I have assessed organizations that are successful with their diversity and inclusion efforts, I have always found that their *why* is clear, concise and consistently communicated to every individual. People in these organizations know how to contribute to the diversity efforts in their workplaces, but more importantly, they know *why* they need to contribute. They understand the benefits that their contributions will bring, and they understand the costs of inaction. Change in these organizations stops being a choice of a few and becomes a part of the culture for all.

When the *why* is clear, the *what* and the *how* flow naturally.

January is named for Janus, the ancient two-headed Roman god of transitions who could see backwards and forwards at the same time. Janus blessed the Romans' celebrations of the New Year which included commitments to learn from the past and promises to build a stronger future. Janus' criteria in blessing a journey from one time or place to the next was his assessment of not just one's willingness to make the journey but one's understanding of *why* the journey was important.

As we resolve to create more diverse and inclusive workplaces in 2009, we are faced with a challenging economic environment and a myriad of competing interests for people's time and energy. I believe that the *what* and the *how* for an exciting 2009 are in place. Creating a compelling and persuasive *why* will ensure that the excitement lasts beyond January.

Happy New Year!