

White Men and Diversity

A Conversation with David E. Matyas

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The goal of this column is to provide a frank and forthright forum to explore the views of white male attorneys regarding diversity initiatives, as well as to examine the role that these attorneys can and should play in those initiatives. In this issue, Diversity & the Bar sat down with David Matyas to discuss these considerations.



David E. Matyas

When David Matyas, a partner at Epstein Becker & Green and a member of the board of directors of the American Health Lawyers Association (Health Lawyers), was first asked to co-chair the Health Lawyers' Advisory Council on Racial and Ethnic Diversity, he wondered if he was a good choice for the position. After all, he is a white man. Could white men lead efforts on racial and ethnic diversity? More important, should they?

Matyas agreed to take on the leadership role; through accepting this responsibility, he also found some guidance on his own questions of whether and how white men should be integrated into an organization's efforts on racial and ethnic diversity. The bottom line, according to Matyas, is that "white men have to be a part of the solution."

Diversity = Different Perspectives

"We all have different perspectives about life, about work, about everything. White men have their perspectives, and those perspectives are important as well. The issue of inclusion is about minorities not being included, but it is an exclusive discussion without white men."

Matyas sees the focus on diversity in the legal profession slowly evolving from a charitable one to one that values the varying perspectives that different people bring to the workplace. He credits some of this evolution to the conversations that corporations are having in their own workplaces, as well as the dialogues that corporate clients are conducting with their legal service providers. He also sees this evolution as a product of diversity efforts maturing in the legal profession, in that "law firms are really starting to understand that diverse perspectives are a business asset, not just a charitable obligation."

This maturation of diversity efforts, according to Matyas, is a real opportunity to engage white men more fully as active participants in diversity and inclusion initiatives: “Minorities don’t want handouts, and people don’t want to give handouts. Now that the conversation is not about handouts, but about diversity being an asset to the firm, it is important to communicate with white men that diversity has the mutually beneficial result of real inclusion, and inclusion includes white men.”

Diversity ≠ Zero-Sum Game

As the legal profession’s efforts on diversity and inclusion mature and evolve, one of the persistent challenges that diversity initiatives encounter is the view that diversity is a zero-sum game: If minorities gain, white men lose. Matyas does not purport to “speak for all white men,” but he feels that “once white men really understand what diversity efforts are trying to do, they recognize that diversity is not a zero-sum game.” In the popular business parlance of today, diversity is really a win-win for everyone. He views diversity efforts as presenting an additional angle from which organizational success can be viewed. “You are not taking [the] focus off any issues; you are adding the focal point of diversity to other issues. It is a matter of adding to things that are important to the firm, not taking anything away. It is not about replacing one important thing with another important thing. It is about recognizing that you now have several important things that you have to look at and consider in measuring success.”

Although Matyas acknowledges that white men often have difficulties seeing themselves as part of the dialogue surrounding diversity and inclusion, he sees white men as slowly realizing that that dialogue represents a business value conversation that they need to understand and interact with in order to better understand the marketplace and changes in client demographics and client demands. “Sometimes white men feel like they have to apologize for being white when people start talking about how others have been excluded, but once they engage in the conversation, they realize that diversity is about how the world is changing, and they need to be a part of that conversation.”

Specifically in law firms where retention and development of good talent are key challenges, Matyas feels that white men are starting to see that “you have to have strategies to retain people generally. You have to retain people who have lots of opportunities. Diversity efforts are part of those overall retention efforts. You are not retaining one person at the expense of another person. You are working hard to retain everyone, and diversity gives you one more tool to do that.”

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Strategies to Engage White Men

Quite often, organizations that commit to creating inclusive efforts on diversity that include white men, and that initiate dialogues to dispel the myth of the zero-sum game, are still unsure about workable strategies for integrating white men as interested, engaged, and invested players in the diversity initiatives. Matyas' practical advice is simple: "You have to take it from talking about diversity and inclusion issues in generalities to specific recommendations."

"Many white men are supportive of diversity, but stay disengaged because they don't know what to do," reflects Matyas. Framing diversity efforts in the general garners support from white men, but it often does not incite action.

Matyas recommends shifting from "Are you committed to diversity?" to "Will you commit to ensuring the success of this one individual?" He refers to the positive reactions he has had to questions such as, "Will you commit this amount of time, these kinds of resources, and taking on these specific sets of tasks in developing this specific individual?" rather than "Will you serve as a mentor in the interest of diversity?" In Matyas's experiences and observations, "people's responses to specific requests are almost always positive and enthusiastic, because they know how they can support it now." Further, specific requests give white men the opportunity to frame any challenges they see in meeting those requests in equally specific terms, instead of feeling like they are saying they do not support diversity. "White men don't want to be viewed badly as not supporting diversity, but they may have a genuine time concern or some other specific challenge. When you give them a specific task, they can tell you their challenge specifically, and you can create solutions around those challenges."

Matyas also believes that, when deciding which individuals should lead an organization's diversity efforts, the focus should be on the individuals' leadership skills and commitment to effectuating change. "Leadership should be about having the skills you need to get the job done, not the color of your skin, and that is true for diversity efforts, too." Matyas recognizes that white men often struggle with questions such as "how visible should I really be" or "would it not be better if a minority attorney was in the leadership role;" nevertheless, he claims that defining leadership roles in diversity efforts reframes these questions. Diversity initiatives that focus on the execution of strategies necessary to meet organizational objectives create an implicit statement that white men can and should be leaders on diversity efforts.

In his formal and informal leadership roles on diversity and inclusion at Epstein Becker & Green as well as with Health Lawyers, Matyas has seen how credibility as a leader on this issue is based more on how one executes tasks and moves the organization in the right direction, rather than the demographic to which the person belongs.

"When you talk about white men and diversity, you have to answer the question that white men may not even realize that they are asking: 'Do I have a role to play in this?' The best thing you can do as a leader in this effort is to implicitly answer the question affirmatively by saying, 'This is the role I want you to play.'"

Diversity & the Bar wishes to thank Dr. Arin N. Reeves for interviewing Mr. Matyas and drafting this column.
