

PUBLICATION

Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace: Go Alone or Go Together?

July 09, 2015

As published in DRI's "For the Defense," May 2015

I like to believe that I am the very embodiment of diversity. I am an African-American female who grew up in the Deep South, and I am a lesbian. I am the youngest of seven children and a first-generation lawyer. Though some of these characteristics are readily apparent, when people learn of the invisible characteristics that make me who I am, I often get the "Wow, you can certainly check every box on the diversity checklist." While there is some truth to this overexaggeration, rather than concentrating on how many boxes I can check, I think it is much more important to embrace the result of my varying experiences because of my differences from the next person.

Despite and in part because of my differences, I have successfully navigated my way through corporate America. I recently became a shareholder in Baker Donelson, a large, sophisticated law firm with more than 650 attorneys in seven states across the Southeast and Washington, D.C. While progress has been made, being one of only two African-American female shareholders in the firm carries with it a tremendous amount of pride and accomplishment and also an equally tantamount sense of responsibility.

This leadership situation is not uncommon. According to the National Association for Law Placement (NALP), in 2014, minority women accounted for only 2.5 percent of partners in firms of all sizes and across most jurisdictions, "making them the most underrepresented group at the partnership level." I believe that it is my personal responsibility to ensure that others coming up through the ranks behind me know that all things are possible and that embracing and showcasing the things that make them different only enhances their paths.

When I was approached to author this column, I thought to myself, "This is such a wonderful opportunity to say so much to such a wide audience, and there are so many things to say." I then quickly realized that I did not want to dilute the message and its potential effect on the masses by overgeneralizing or by trying to save the world in one article. To that end, I want to focus on the importance of diversity in the workplace and how our individual differences, when embraced, only strengthen our respective organizations collectively.

A very dear friend of mine once said, "There are enough ways in this world for ALL of us to have his or her own." Indeed, the differences among us don't cease to exist once we enter the workplace. Regardless of who you are or the background that you have, you want to be able to be open, honest, and safe at home, at work, and in the community. Many of us spend a majority of our time in our various places of work, so of course we want to be comfortable in those environments. It is axiomatic that employees who are happy and secure in their jobs, and who do not have to spend time hiding who they are for fear of reprisal, perform their jobs better and more efficiently than those employees who are unhappy. To help foster environments where all employees are comfortable, more organizations, large and small, are incorporating various diversity training programs for their employees. The philosophy behind this approach is that by valuing the individual, we are stronger as a whole, and working toward an environment where diversity is embraced is the most important step toward that end goal. I am proud to say that my organization recognizes this.

This year, 2015, is Baker Donelson's sixth consecutive year to be included on FORTUNE magazines "100 Best Companies to Work For" list, which recognizes companies that have exceptional workplace cultures. It is

ranked thirtieth on the list, and this is our second consecutive year as the law firm with the highest rank on that list. A workplace culture necessarily includes a focus on the people who make up that workforce. My law firm has committed to training its entire workforce on diversity and implicit bias - those positive or negative mental attitudes someone may hold, at an unconscious level, toward a person, thing, or group. The training, which is conducted by me and other attorneys throughout our 19 offices, is meant to increase awareness about diversity and implicit bias, discuss how implicit bias can affect hiring, work assignments, relationships, promotions, and other decisions, and identify what individuals can do to reduce the influence of implicit bias.

Morally, the motivation to be fair and balanced in everything that we do makes diversity awareness and implicit bias training indubitably the right decision. However, the business case for embracing diversity is just as convincing. People with different experiences, backgrounds, values, opinions, and ideas bring to the table a plethora of benefits to a business as a whole. It helps us to have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to relate better to diverse clients and to meet clients' expectations. It keeps our organization on the cutting-edge of trends in antidiscrimination practices and discrimination's current meaning. It helps with retention of highly qualified and talented individuals who might otherwise leave because of issues caused by implicit bias. It creates a level playing field for employees by eliminating implicit biases. It helps us as a firm to make informed decisions with well-rounded input, and it results in a more collegial workplace with greater productivity, unity, and inclusiveness. These are just a few of the many benefits of recognizing the importance of diversity and respecting and embracing people's differences.

This is a relevant and timely conversation to have against the backdrop of some of the world-changing events going on as I write this article. We are dealing with the effects and the fallout of the Ferguson, Missouri, situation and the videos of University of Oklahoma Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity members chanting a discriminatory song about the exclusion and lynching of African Americans. Further, as I sit here and write this article, people are marching from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery, Alabama, to commemorate the iconic 1965 march that ultimately led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a law that was recently gutted by the U.S. Supreme Court. We are nearing the end of the term of our first African-American president and looking toward a 2016 election with a possibility of seeing our first female president. We are fortunate to have Justice Sonya Sotomayor, our first female justice of Hispanic heritage, sitting on the Supreme Court of the United States. That Court, on April 28, 2015, will have for the first time taken up the issue of whether states can ban gay marriage, or whether those bans are prohibited by the U.S. Constitution's guarantee of equal protection under the law. Currently, 37 states and Washington, D.C., allow gay marriage.

There is an African proverb that states, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." We cannot continue to go far unless and until we stop paying lip service to the importance of diversity and put into action what we proclaim. As legal professionals, we have a duty to the rest of the world to lead by example. While we have had setbacks as a whole, we are making far more positive strides than ever before. We have done this because we have chosen to do it together. Because of my choice, we will go far together.