



Diversity: Making it more than just a buzzword

A plan for increasing diversity and the motivation for taking action

BY SHAANA A. RAHMAN

I have spent the better part of the last decade as a Chair of the San Francisco Trial Lawyers Association's Diversity Committee. I repeatedly hear from leaders in various legal organizations that their organization "needs diversity." At a recent cocktail party, I was talking to "Joe Trial Lawyer" and he told me this very thing. I asked "why do you think your organization needs diversity?" Joe responded "well diversity is good."

"True, but why?" I pressed.

"Because we need it," Joe responded.

"But *why* do you need it, what do you hope to accomplish?" I asked. The pained, uncomfortable look on Joe's face and the shrug of his shoulders made me sigh and ask the final question: "how would you like to increase diversity in your organization" knowing the response as I had heard it many times before.

"Well, I'd like you to join our diversity committee," Joe happily retorted.

"And then what happens?" I cautiously asked, hopeful that there was more. A blank stare, mumbling about needing a refill and Joe is in the wind.

Sadly, I have had this same conversation too many times to count. I truly believe that all of the Joe/Josephine Trial Lawyers out there are getting excited about diversity as a concept and that is an amazing advance for our profession. I also believe that most of us know why we need to increase diversity in our profession. We need to encourage diversity because as plaintiffs' lawyers we work for the little guy. The underdog. Those who have nothing. People who are from all walks of

life. We want diversity in our profession so we can offer our diverse clients a chance to be represented by someone from their community. If we do this, we make it better. We make change. Positive change. What we need now is a plan.

The "how" question

I think all of our organizations have struggled with the "how" question. Let's face it, making institutional change is hard. It's a slow process and requires time, commitment and money – all things many organizations might not have an abundance of. We certainly had those hurdles in the San Francisco Trial Lawyers Association ("SFTLA"), but we also have always had leadership well ahead of the curve in recognizing the importance of a diverse, representative plaintiffs' bar. SFTLA was so committed to the idea of diversity a decade ago, the organization crafted a Diversity Mission Statement and there was a will on the part of the Board to translate the mission statement into action.

Nine years ago we created the Diversity Fellowship program. The idea was to encourage diverse law students to join our ranks and become trial lawyers. The first challenge was to define "diversity" and we did so broadly. Our program is open to students who "exhibit a diversity of traits and attributes in age, race, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic factors or national origin or demonstrate a commitment to fostering such diversity within the legal community." The next challenge, we learned, was that most law students didn't know what it meant to be a trial lawyer and they

certainly didn't understand how we protect civil justice. Armed with this information, we knew that we would have to go out into the schools and educate law students and show them what we do and why what we do is valuable to society and rewarding on a personal level.

Each year the Diversity Committee awards four diverse law students an SFTLA Trial Advocacy Fellowship. Each student receives \$6,000 and gets to spend the summer in an intensive 11-week program where they are mentored by some of the greatest trial lawyers in our organization. The program is open to applicants from all accredited law schools.

To allow for a complete experience whereby students can be immersed in different practice areas and different firm cultures, the program is split into three rotations, each 3 to 4 weeks long, so the students get to experience three different law firms. Each year, we are inundated by resumes of fantastic candidates. The interview process is rigorous and the Committee is amazed at the professionalism and maturity of the law students we see. The students have overcome almost insurmountable hurdles to get to law school. They have had success. They have had failure. They have faced adversity head-on and pressed forward.

During the course of the Fellowship we have graduated 30 students from our program. The most rewarding part of this program has been seeing our Fellows stay in SFTLA and work in our firms as trial lawyers.

This program is just an example of what we can do as a community. As plaintiffs' lawyers we are creative. We are



scrappy. We know how to roll up our sleeves and tackle the big problems. It's time to roll up our sleeves and implement change.

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