

# The Leader's Role in Diversity and Inclusion: Transformational Leadership

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For law firms, an effective diversity and inclusion initiative must start with having a legal organization that is made up of individuals from various backgrounds, perspectives and experiences, including those who are traditionally underrepresented in the profession. The environment must also integrate those voices and perspectives in a valued and meaningful way.

If there were a playbook for implementing an effective diversity and inclusion strategy, the first rule would be to obtain leadership buy-in. But the term “buy-in” is misleading — it suggests that leadership merely must be in agreement when, in fact, to obtain meaningful progress in diversity and inclusion, leadership approval is not enough. Leaders play the most important role in shaping their organization's success in diversity and inclusion. They have to own the effort, drive the strategy and model the action. In other words, they must be transformational leaders.

Law firms and corporate legal departments that have received recognition for success in creating diverse and inclusive environments have leaders who are public and outspoken about their commitment to diversity, who are proactive and innovative in their strategies and who are consistent and persistent in their expectations. For example, an in-house legal department exhibits sound management when implementing a convergence process to develop a preferred provider or primary law firm network, but transformational leadership requires law firms to demonstrate a commitment to diversity as part of that process.

A law firm recruiting legal talent cannot be faulted for hoping that it will eventually attract and hire women, minority and LGBT lawyers organically. But transformational leaders recognize that if they aren't making progress in recruiting lawyers from various backgrounds and perspectives, then they have to adjust their strategy and try different tactics.

Ballard Spahr's Denver office has been creative in trying to expand its applicant pool as part of its recruiting efforts. Whether it is through specific outreach to minority law student groups, hosting a resume and interview skills workshop for diverse first-year law students or Ballard Spahr's 1L Diversity Fellowship, we explored different and innovative approaches in building a diverse office. Here are the keys:

## OWN THE EFFORT

Transformational leaders weave diversity and inclusion into larger messages. The message of inclusion is embedded in larger conversations — whether it is the chief legal officer, the firm managing partner's annual address or hiring and recruiting discussions that remind individuals that creating diverse candidate slates is an expectation, not a happenstance. Office managing partners, chief legal officers, practice leaders and others can also find a way to incorporate the message of valuing diversity and inclusion, whether it is when talking about recruiting the best and brightest talent, or whether it is in talking about the values of the department.

## DRIVE THE STRATEGY

Transformational leaders recognize that there will be different motivators for different people, and they know how to move people to action within that framework.

Some may be motivated by the moral case for diversity and inclusion, which says it is the right thing to do. Some may be motivated by the economic case that says clients expect it, so we better get on board. Others may be motivated by the intelligence factor, which says the best ideas are generated by diverse perspectives, not the brainpower of one person or a small group of similar perspectives.

Transformational leaders bring everyone on board, inspiring with a mix of self-interest and altruism.

## MODEL THE ACTION

Transformational leaders display the behaviors they want to see in others. Office managing partners who are the first to volunteer to support and attend diversity-related events show leadership commitment. The absence of words or action by a leader can send a silent message of a lack of true commitment.

Integrating the various, and sometimes divergent, voices and perspectives of others into the discussion are a way to demonstrate inclusion. Opportunities range from soliciting broader input as to where the holiday party will be held to ensuring there is diversity among the group charged with evaluating, compensating and promoting lawyers.

The transformational leader is always focused on making sure there are multiple viewpoints in the room. For example, if you are forming a committee to examine retention of women lawyers, instinct might say that committee should consist of only women, but diversity and inclusion says that the male perspective is critical to the discussion, so men should be on that committee as well. Likewise, expecting women and attorneys of color to participate in diversity-related activities without the expectation that white male

lawyers are also involved is not inclusive and does not recognize the value that everyone brings.

Finally, transformational leaders are vulnerable themselves. They acknowledge and recognize that they have the same issues of self-awareness and bias that we all carry. But we have found that those who are the greatest leaders in this field acknowledge that they are still learning and must see things differently. They are turning past mistakes into lessons learned and using their position to educate and influence others.

To lead progress in diversity and inclusion, key characteristics of transformational leaders include:

- Expressing diversity and inclusion as a clear core value that is stated unequivocally
- Role modeling of inclusive behaviors
- Self-awareness, particularly of one's own biases
- Persistent and consistent
- Recognition of the potential of their positions to become effective change agents
- Willingness to consider the viewpoints of others outside the leadership sphere
- Risk-taking
- Sense of public need

Meaningful progress in diversity and inclusion means that our recruiting and hiring looks different. It means that our professional development, retention and advancement approaches take into account different career paths and what motivates lawyers to take them. It means that we are creating client teams and leadership positions with diversity and inclusion in mind. Ultimately, it means we are determined to change our rhetoric and expectations, which drives to different and better results.

Those better results only happen when leaders are willing to become change agents and acknowledge that solutions aren't always found — they have to be made. •

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