



IT'S TIME FOR A CHANGE

BY ADRIAN D. THOMPSON

It's time to make meaningful changes to equity, inclusion, and diversity practices in the legal profession. Many in the legal profession are already putting systems in place to produce equitable opportunities and inclusive environments where all team members have a real chance to succeed and lead. However, there's more work to be done.

Equity, inclusion, and diversity are not about numbers but culture and environment. Unless we see meaningful changes in our cultures and environments, we will struggle to create the profession that many in the legal industry want to see.

Hiring diverse team members may be a starting point, but we must do more. First, face the facts by reviewing data and current practices. Mission statements and websites extolling the values of inclusion, equity, and diversity are fine, but what is really happening within your organization? Results can serve as a guide to refine current policies, practices, and procedures. This data can also help an organization identify areas where equity, inclusion, and diversity systems have suffered and illustrate how to address those shortcomings in the future.

Next, we need more transparency across the workplace. We must establish clear, non-biased, and accessible paths to career advancement and leadership opportunities. We must give all attorneys, especially people of color, women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and lawyers with disabilities, meaningful opportunities to earn a seat at the table. We must commit to removing historical barriers preventing diverse lawyer representation in leadership roles within our organizations. In addition, we must encourage outstanding diverse team members to use their unique perspectives to develop innovative, value-creating, and sustainable solutions for

clients. It won't be easy. To create an inclusive and collegial workplace culture, leaders must embrace change, honestly evaluate progress, and acknowledge institutional weaknesses. Fortunately, the potential payoff is excellent. There's a clear business case favoring greater equity, inclusion, and diversity: research has shown that diverse teams produce better results, generate higher levels of trust, and increase engagement and retention within organizations. Moreover, clients are becoming increasingly serious about hiring outside lawyers who look like them.

For their part, diverse young lawyers, particularly attorneys of color, need to understand the overarching culture of the legal profession. They must learn the rules — written and unwritten — of the firms and organizations where they work: how they advance, the requirements for partnership and leadership positions, and what clients and the firm look for in leaders. They have to take active control of their futures, develop relationships with potential mentors and champions, create their own opportunities, and, most of all, fully participate in creating tomorrow's fair and equitable law organizations.

In exchange, I am confident they will find employers where their perspective is valued and they have a voice in decisions. Employers that welcome their contributions and value their varied backgrounds will flourish because of cultural differences, rather than despite them.

Equally important, they will find colleagues and mentors eager to invest in their futures, contribute to their professional and personal growth, and provide them with opportunities to reach their full potential.

But there's more to consider than making attorneys — and even clients — satisfied with strong equity, inclusion, and

diversity initiatives. Evolution in the legal profession is an existential necessity. More to the point, employers will fail to compete without an inclusive and flexible culture that values lawyers' individual differences and diverse life experiences. Lawyers will leave for competitors who value inclusive environments where all team members have real opportunities to succeed. Law students will skip on-campus interviews with certain firms. Clients will team with firms that share their values and objectives.

Those who want to remain competitive need to recognize this is the future. Let's continue to bring about the change the profession needs.

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