

LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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Moving from Diversity to Cultural Change

Our one-on-one interview with Vernā Myers, Cultural Innovation Consultant



“People are so worried about saying the wrong thing when it comes to diversity, so they say nothing, or they say the wrong thing and don't realize it,” says Vernā Myers to open her session at the 2015 Annual Conference & Expo last May. “All of us wish we were better than we actually are on any of these subjects.”

Myers is a Consultant on diversity and inclusion, or what she calls “cultural innovation,” and owner of [Vernā Myers Consulting Group, LLC](#). She is also the author of *What If I Say the Wrong Thing? 25 Habits for Culturally Effective People and Moving Diversity Forward: How to Go from Well-Meaning to Well-Doing*. She has also given a [TED Talk on unconscious biases](#). To say she's the expert on cultural innovation is an understatement.

Her focus during the first part of the session — during which she and fellow Consultant Cristina Hernandez laid the groundwork of cultural innovation — was how to move past mistakes and learn from them moving forward.

“Move toward the thing, engage the thing that makes you uncomfortable,” Myers says. “Dig into that. Sometimes a parent is so adamant about some beliefs, that we think they are universal. When you are missing a lot of information, your interpretation [of a person or situation] might be wrong.”

“What we hope people understand is that we've probably gone as far as we can trying to make changes by just tinkering around the edges. We really do need to talk about long-term cultural change.”

Myers said leaders need to ask all their employees what their needs are and how the organization can help them thrive in the workplace environment.

“Admitting that there is something you don't know is the first step,” she says. “If you have enough curiosity, you will put in place all the processes you need to find what you have been missing. You've got to be willing to ask.”

Before her session in Nashville, Myers sat down with Legal Management to further dive into diversity, cultural change and how they impact your office.

1. WHAT IS THE NO. 1 THING YOU HOPE MEMBERS TAKE BACK TO THEIR WORKPLACES FROM YOUR SESSIONS?

VM: Cristina [Hernandez] and I are going to be talking about something that I think we don't really consider in what diversity and inclusion means very often, which is cultural change. So we're going to talk about this idea of cultural innovation, and what we hope people understand is that we've probably gone as far as we can trying to make changes by just tinkering around the edges. We really do need to talk about long-term cultural change.

2. FLIPPING THINGS ON THEIR HEADS A LITTLE BIT INSTEAD OF THINKING ONE SMALL CHANGE WILL MAKE THE DIFFERENCE?

VM: Yes — the culture that we now have in most law firms are cultures that have been shaped by a certain preference for a certain group of people. There is nothing wrong with that in itself, except that the people, the talent base, the clients have all changed and become more diverse. But we're running our law firms based on an old, male, white male, Western model. I just don't see how as a profession we can continue to be excellent without shifting and changing aspects of the culture.

3. WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO AN ADMINISTRATOR WHO IS DEALING WITH SOME RESISTANCE FROM LAWYERS OR MANAGING PARTNERS?

VM: There are so many reports now that suggest that teams are enhanced by diversity. There are reports that are linking financial performance to diversity — maybe not causation, but definitely correlation. The best, most profitable companies also are most diverse. I would also be looking at issues around how the firm is spending money. What is it spending to bring people in, and how long are they staying? What's the return on investment? If you are an open, fair, meritocratic organization, if you care to get the best people, you will have to figure out how to make sure that those people come and that they thrive in that environment. So I would say go to your resisters with information and data.

4. WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE HARDEST-HITTING ARGUMENT TO CONVINCE C-LEVEL DECISION-MAKERS IN A FIRM THAT DIVERSITY IS A TOP PRIORITY, AND A BUSINESS PRIORITY?

VM: I think that the real thing to do is for administrators to be strategic. What that means is, you have to know your person, know what they care about. Maybe they're more interested in the moral aspect. Maybe they're just righteous, justice-oriented people. I would then go that way with my strategy. Or maybe they are the bean-counters and they're very focused on that, or they went through a bad time and now they're really scared. So you've got to go and talk to them about your top clients and how ... you might be able to access a matter or business that you wouldn't be able to access without [diversity]. Someone might be into teamwork and team effectiveness, and maybe that's the larger strategy for the firm. So you want to make the connection between being able to lead in a competent — culturally competent — way and making teams their best. You've got to be really strategic.

5. DO YOU THINK CERTAIN INDUSTRIES ARE MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO RESISTANCE THAN OTHERS? HAVE YOU SEEN ANY PARTICULAR TRENDS IN THAT REGARD?

VM: Yes and no. Are lawyers like other people? Well, a lot of the psychological studies say that lawyers aren't. They're often more pessimistic, more risk-averse — and so we do have some self-selection within the legal world. So the fact that they are coming from a certain group of people may make it harder to make change in law firms, but I think the harder part is the structural aspect of law firms. People are people, and change is hard, and people resist change just generally because what we're talking about is moving out of the status quo.

CONTINUE THE CULTURAL INNOVATION CONVERSATION

Vernā Myers is on a personal mission to disrupt the status quo and she knows how to: she's lived it. Myers rose out of Baltimore's working class to become a Harvard-trained lawyer, entrepreneur, author and cultural innovator. Listen to her delve more into diversity and the workplace on her recent podcast with [Legal Management Talk](#).
