Monthly Spotlight: Two Sides of the Same Coin
- Defining Diversity and Organizational Needs

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In November, according to reports, the former Apple diversity chief stepped down after criticism of her stating that "being a minority or a woman are not the only criteria for diversity." The statement brought about ire and support. Why is it important to address diversity in specific aspects, as well as address it broadly?

The tech world, like the legal world, still has a long way to go to be able to have greater representation with respect to women, people of color and LGBT diversity, both among the ranks, and in leadership. This is a fact that has been cited in numerous articles and studies. Focusing on how to attract, develop and retain specific areas of diversity is a top priority in both industries. At the same time, both industries are seeking top talent and recognize the importance of diversity of thoughts, experience, background, abilities, etc., to meet the ever growing and ever competitive needs of the global marketplace.

These two approaches and ways to define diversity – the need to increase representation of women, people of color and LGBT diversity and the need to define diversity broadly and includes many aspects, including diversity of thought, background, experience, etc. - are not mutually exclusive. To say that the need for one diminishes the need for the other is short sighted and does not address the bottom line problem of building awareness on the importance of inclusion among all members of an organization, and the need to recognize and support the unique characteristics of diversity among its workforce. Inclusion is really where the rubber meets the road.

These two traditionally majority owned and operated industries have strong needs to build a workforce that is consistent with a global society to reflect the people and groups they serve. Both must determine the needs they have to be the best organization they can be, which includes all aspects of diversity. Clients and customers are demanding more diverse representation. However, to bring someone in based on the color of their skin, gender or sexual orientation or identity to "look like" the diverse society, will get the organization nowhere if the overall culture of the company or firm is not one of inclusion rather than exclusion.

Inclusion requires the responsibility of all parties to "take it on personally" to be a part of the solution to solve the problem. Otherwise, these organizations will continually be like a revolving door and the needle on the numbers will not move, and could even stagnate or go backwards.

So, how does a company make progress if it is focusing on all types of diversity? Here are three things that need to be in place.

1. All voices need to be at the table, and this includes both sides of the coin. Otherwise, there is a risk that the process becomes a "recruiting, or an HR, or a diversity committee/council" project. The need for a well-represented diverse workforce and leadership is not a "project." It is a necessity – period.
2. If the larger numbers in the organization fall within the category of the privileged majority, the best efforts are reached when awareness is built, and everyone gets on board for understanding, really understanding, the importance of expanding diversity and focusing on inclusion.
3. It is not a numbers game, about counting people. It must be a diligent process to make people count.

If an organization wants everyone on board, then everyone needs to understand the value of a broad definition of diversity, as well as the need for focusing on inclusion of all types of diversity. The 1957 movie, Twelve Angry Men, highlighted how a room of all white male jurors could change the course of a verdict, once at least one person (a white male) withheld his vote to convict the defendant. What followed, were the aspects of diversity of thought, background and experience among a room of seemingly "same" jurors. Consider that this is what Apple's previous diversity chief was likely referring to in her comments. Today, the hope is that a jury would represent one's peers.

Isn't that what organizations want and need to do to be like their customer and client base? If that is the case, then some of the peers may look like the majority, but that is not where the problem lies. The issue lies with the lack of inclusion of the diversity that does not look like the majority, and that must be top priority. Otherwise, it will be difficult to attract and retain women, people of color, LGBT and people with disabilities. Who would want to come in the door and stay, if they do not feel valued and that they can contribute?

To reduce diversity to a definition of either/or is a very dualistic way of looking at a very complex problem, which does not have to be complex. It won't be if all individuals take responsibility for contributing to an inclusive culture. Therein lies the solution. Take care of inclusion and all aspects of diversity will follow.

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The ALA Committee on Diversity and Inclusion offers resources and tools to help organizations and individuals advance diversity and inclusion with a focus on the legal services environment. Visit www.alanet.org/about/diversity to learn more. Email diversity@alanet.org to contact the Committee.

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