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By Christina Martini
DLA Piper



By David Susler
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Why differences bridge differences

Here is a portion of the conversation. An extended version is on video at chicagolawyer.com.

Why is it important to have a diverse group of people on a client matter?

Tina Martini: It is important to have a diverse group of lawyers on a matter because the real world is diverse. Thus, clients, their businesses and the workforce continuously evolve accordingly. Today's legal issues often impact businesses and individuals across different geographies, age groups, ethnicities and backgrounds. From a problem-solving perspective, it is most effective to have collaboration among a diverse group ... Everyone has their strengths, weaknesses and blind spots by virtue of their professional and life experiences. Collaborating with a diverse group helps minimize the impact of those weaknesses and blind spots and helps leverage effective decision-making skills into positive results. If these reasons are not compelling enough, the simple fact is that clients are demanding diverse teams more and more frequently and firms that do not comply are increasingly being taken to task and losing business opportunities as a result. ...

David Susler: The team approach is easier, faster and better than one person trying to do it all alone. When you have a diverse team with different backgrounds, different approaches, different ideas, the result is typically enhanced creativity, better and more productive communication, faster problem solving and enhanced client service.

Without diversity, especially in today's world, you run the risk of making potentially catastrophic decisions by failing to include different viewpoints or perspectives. Remember the Chevy Nova story that nobody in Spanish-speaking countries bought the car because "no va" means "no go" in Spanish?

While that is an urban legend, it is still a useful lesson about both the importance and value of diversity. If you want to successfully reach a particular audience, include someone from that audience on the team.

What is the next step in diversity and inclusion in the workplace?

Martini: The next step is to focus a lot more on what brings us together as professionals and people rather than on what divides us. As trite as it may sound, it is essential to effectively creating and maintaining an inclusive work environment. I think each of us, both individually and collectively, can go far in achieving this goal if we take it upon ourselves in each interaction we have to look for ways to build a rapport with others and to put ourselves in their shoes. You would be amazed at the value and power of such a simple attitudinal and behavioral approach. ...

Susler: ... To paraphrase my friend Jason Brown, executive director and general counsel of [The National Association of Minority and Women Owned Law Firms], you can invite all sorts of diverse people to the party, but if you want them to stay, you have to include and involve them in meaningful, substantive ways. Whether in a firm or a company, this requires more than just bringing diverse people to a meeting. Diverse attorneys have to be real stakeholders in matters and in the business. To ensure this becomes reality, in-house counsel can, for example, designate that a minimum percentage of outside legal work must go to women and minority-owned firms. With larger firms, clients can require that women and minority partners be the relationship partners and that associates have meaningful roles. ...

Why are you interested in diversity?

Martini: ... On a very basic level, diversity goes to the essence of who I am as an indi-

vidual and who I am within the context of my family and in society. This is in large part due to my mother's influence. My mother was born and raised in Mexico City during the 1930s and 1940s, and although she was very well educated and a prodigy of sorts, she was unable to fulfill her dream of becoming a doctor in Mexico. She saw the U.S. as the land of opportunity and moved to Chicago in the late 1950s. She soon encountered discrimination here, as both a woman and as a Mexican, and, unfortunately, was unable to fulfill her dream before she died. As her daughter, I was taught at a very young age how important it is to live up to your life's potential, whatever that may be, and to work hard, be grateful and generous and help others along the way, because you never know how much of a difference you can make in another person's life. Diversity falls squarely within this construct. ...

Susler: ... I was raised to believe all people are equal and should be afforded equal rights and opportunities. My grandfather was the first merchant in my hometown to hire a black man to sell retail to customers, despite the other white merchants in town telling him he could not do that. My father established the first full-time, fully funded legal aid office in my hometown to provide legal representation to the black community. ... I was raised in a diverse world where that was just the way it was. Unfortunately, that is not the larger reality in the world and it is not going to become a truly integrated world on its own, so I have to do my part to help make it happen. ■

David and Tina are not only lawyers who practice on different sides of the table, but they are also married to each other.

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