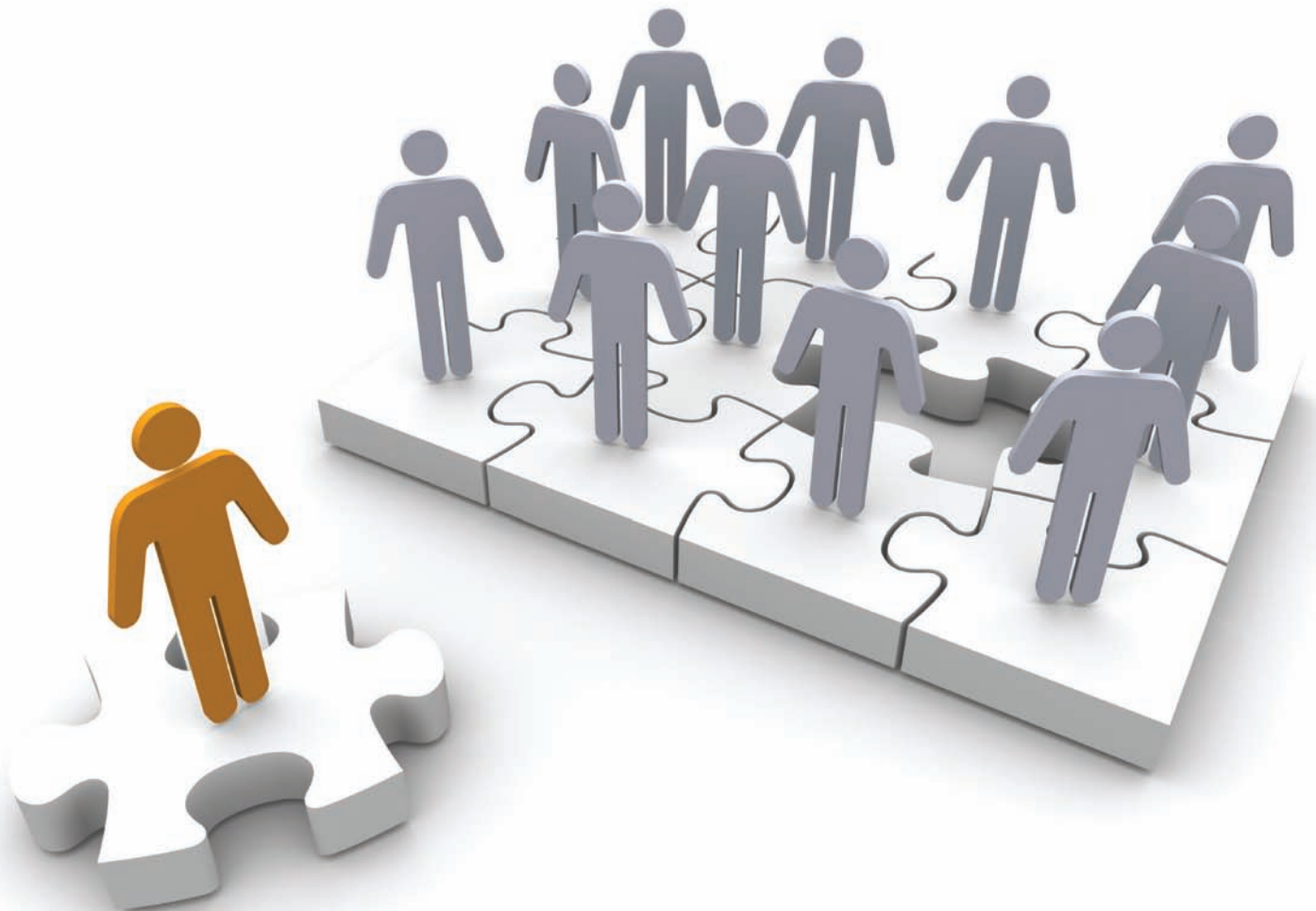


Building the Bridge to Inclusion: The Work of Law Firm Leaders

An inclusive leader in a law firm creates a culture of innovation and celebrates the group over the individual, ultimately changing the firm's focus from "I" to "We."

BY MARTHA FAY AFRICA



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Remember the first time you heard someone say “information superhighway?” Remember your response along the lines of “What is that, and why should I care?” Remember when you first heard the word “sustainability?” Same thing. Now try on “inclusion” for size. These concepts emerge in our culture as buzzwords, then work their way into our consciousness and our daily lives with an inevitability that is futile to resist.

The truth is, the concept of inclusion is as old as the human race. Or, some might say it started with “Do unto others . . .” But the current focus has more to do with the rapidly changing demographics of the global and U.S. workforces than it does with the Golden Rule. Or does it? We might need to learn the lesson of the Golden Rule all over again.

THE NEED FOR VISIONARY BRIDGE BUILDERS

With the advent of the billable hour, which is based on individual versus group or team productivity, came a culture shift in U.S. law firms. In many venues, the lawyer who billed the most was more highly valued than the lawyer who billed less but did better work. Lawyers, often cited as society’s ultimate problem solvers, had created working lifestyles for themselves that isolated them from their colleagues and often their families and clients. Individual

by the mid-1980s corporations began pressuring law firms to diversify as well as to retain and promote women and lawyers of color. Gradually, as the notion of diversity as a desired norm took root in America’s corporations and culture, the definition of diversity expanded to include many kinds and degrees of difference. All could contribute, all should be included, and all difference could be embraced. If corporate America could do it and make it work, then why couldn’t law firms?

Of necessity in the face of competition, law firm leaders have focused on their bottom lines, which are fed by the billable hour and by effective firm management. But if the bottom lines are “fed” by the interplay of the billable hour and effective management practices, they are “bled” by the loss of talent, by turnover, by discontent, and by rigid practices that often encourage homogeneity at the expense of

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competition, pitting one lawyer’s total of billed hours against another’s, became the primary determinant of lawyer value. This replaced group or entity competition as the primary mechanism for measuring the lawyers’ relative values in the firm’s collective efforts.

Then, as more women and people of color turned to law as a profession in ensuing years, law firms sought to hire them. But relatively few persisted in the contemporary American law firm, and many sought employment elsewhere. They were welcomed by corporate America, and

genuine difference. It is well-known that more women and lawyers of color leave law firms than do others, but in many law firms turnover has reached a serious, unspoken crisis.

Smart lawyers have been puzzled, pained, and embarrassed by the dismal diversity track record of many American law firms. If the rise of the diversity consultant and diversity managers on the American legal landscape is any indicia of this concern, then one must recognize how much money and time many prominent firms are flinging at this issue. Still, far too many have little to show for it. Yet

If most law firms are hierarchical, inclusive leaders see another way to lead. Rather than conceptualizing themselves as having ascended to the top of a ladder, they think of themselves as bridge builders capable of creating a toll-free bridge on which you and I can walk, together.

diversity is everywhere, and unavoidable, in our culture. So who will teach us how to thrive by embracing it in our law firms? Enter the inclusive leader.

THE INCLUSIVE LEADER'S FOCUS: "WE," NOT "I"

If most law firms are hierarchical, inclusive leaders see another way to lead. Rather than conceptualizing themselves as having ascended to the top of a ladder, they think of themselves as bridge builders capable of creating a toll-free bridge on which you and I can walk, together. They have a long-term focus and recognize that change is slow to come, but that it can not come in a culture where people don't trust each other, know each other, or feel they are acknowledged or valued.

An inclusive leader creates a culture of innovation, of learning, and celebrates the group over the individual. This leader changes the firm's focus from "I" to "We," raises the level of compassion, removes barriers to success, and has far greater comfort with questions than assertions. Soliciting input broadly strengthens every decision made by this leader, and by doing so, shapes consensus rather than forcing edicts. Such leaders create safe environments where the natural fear of risk in a professional workplace is lowered, where people at all levels are encouraged to take risks and grow and to make space for the ideas of others and – most important – to listen carefully to those ideas. Barriers to participation are reduced if they are not limited, if the route to accomplishment is transparent, if the conversations are authentic, and if failure is tolerated because sometimes great learning comes from great mistakes!

An inclusive leader helps others to create a place where people want to work, where they can see their future through the open doors around them. The Haitian mailroom clerk can walk through one of those open doors, go to law school, and return to join his former colleagues in the practice of law. The reserved lawyer who was formerly uncomfortable at firm

social events comes to realize that she is a respected member of the community and valued for exactly who she is. This leader favors innovation over perfection, generating a collaborative environment that transforms firm metrics to value most those that are based on group rather than individual effort. This leader is excited about the future, thinks in terms of "and" rather than "but," and loves the push-and-pull that comes from exploring competing ideas and solutions. This leader is self-aware, able to process conflicting truths, and removes the tone of judgment when providing feedback.

Someone once said that all human relationships are an experiment of sorts, that we just don't usually recognize it. Because we all assume that our differences create barriers, we fail to recognize that underneath this skin we are privileged to wear, we are the same, or very nearly so. Inclusionary thinking does not mean that no one should ever leave the law firm for a new opportunity or that all professional relationships can or should be eternal. Inclusionary thinking does celebrate that which binds us, helps us bring out the best in ourselves and others, and allows us to appreciate the light that is waiting in the other to be discovered, celebrated, and burnished.

That leader could be you. ♦

about the author



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