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INSIGHT ON DIVERSITY

Ways to Make Your Workplace More Inclusive

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Special to the Legal

What's on the walls of your office, and what does it express not only about you but also about who would be comfortable there?

On Nov. 16, 2018, as part of the Philadelphia Diversity Law Group's program "Diversity in the First Chair: Symposium on Women and Diverse Lawyers in the Courtroom and Boardroom," Kenji Yoshino, the NYU Law School Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor of Constitutional Law, spoke to a select group of law firm leaders and managing partners about how to foster more inclusive workplaces. First, Yoshino described "covering" behavior, in which individuals downplay or reject manners, affiliations or activities in order to "fit in" at work, to the detriment of both the individual and the organization. He then offered strategies that firms and legal departments can



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use to create environments where all employees have a shared sense of belonging. And finally, Yoshino offered practical suggestions that individuals can adopt to create and foster a more inclusive workplace. And assessing your office artwork was just one of them.

INTERVIEWING

Many of us have heard or read about how classical orchestras have diversified their ranks by holding blind auditions, meaning that the musicians are hidden from the view of the evaluators while playing. But in the law firm setting, it is impossible to interview someone

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behind a screen, so we should look to other methods to minimize the effects of unconscious bias during the hiring process. Yoshino proposes that one way to do this is to approach each candidate identically—ask the same questions, in the same order, and then assess the interviewee immediately after to prevent making comparisons in hindsight. While at first this may feel stilted and unnatural, gaining comfort with this technique results in fairer evaluations of potential hires.

OFFICE CUES

Yes, the paintings on your walls and the knick-knacks on your desk can be some of the most important ways to demonstrate that your workplace invites and supports individuals of differing backgrounds. Take a moment to survey your office for artwork that might make others feel as though they don't belong, and consider an alternative instead. On the flip side, displaying photographs of children or awards from affinity groups such as the Lambda Law Society sends cues to others that you are comfortable being yourself in the office, and that others can be too.

EQUAL VOICES AT THE TABLE

There are a multitude of studies showing that women and people of color often are not given an equal opportunity to speak in a group setting, either by being cut off or talked over or by being passed over for input. To counteract that phenomenon, individuals can help provide safety for others to speak. For example, everyone can make sure to visibly give your attention to the person who is speaking and make space for others to provide input if they choose to. If you note that someone was cut off, you can refer back to the person to amplify and give credit to their contribution. Finally, it is important to take into consideration the views of those who may decide not to speak in a group setting by soliciting their input one-on-one in advance of or after a meeting.

SHARE YOUR STORY

Yoshino pressed that one of the most potent ways to create an inclusive environment is to share your own stories of experiences that define who you are and how your identity has fit into your work environment, either as a model of how an employer has reacted in a positive manner, or as a starting point for what a better approach might be. Sharing one's personal story requires that the storyteller be vulnerable and trusting in others, which both necessitates and creates a safe setting for important discussions of how to respect and appreciate the variety of experiences individuals bring to the workplace.

BE AN ALLY FOR ALL

There has been much discussion in recent years about how to be an "ally" to others, and Yoshino emphasized the need to grow from being an ally to one, meaning a particular person, to an ally for some, say a particular diverse group, to an ally for all. This final, enlightened level of ally-hood means that concerns are framed as ways to help everyone, not just a single person or group, and as identifying a need to improve systems, not individuals. In being an ally for all, it is particularly important that people work with others and solicit input from all stakeholders, and to see mistakes and missteps as opportunities to grow and not just problems to be solved.

While not everyone may be able to implement each of these suggestions within the confines of their own firms or legal department (for example, all attorneys might not participate in the hiring process), there is food for thought here for all of us, and there should be at least one or two strategies offered by Yoshino that any lawyer can implement in order to create workplaces where individuals with diverse backgrounds and strengths all have their own opportunities to succeed and, in so doing, help their firms and companies thrive. •

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