



Beyond the Numbers: Shifting the Focus from Quantitative Diversity to Qualitative Diversity

Yanika C. Smith-Bartley, Nashville, 615.726.5772, ysmith-bartley@bakerdonelson.com

Businesses often tie the “business case” for diversity to the “bottom line,” perhaps in order to gain the support of those who otherwise would be resistant to the cause for diversity. While, undoubtedly, diversity positively affects the bottom line, making it a “business case” puts the focus solely on the numbers. Likewise, looking only at diversity statistics without analyzing the satisfaction and success of diverse employees ignores the big picture. Together, we must shift the focus to look beyond the numbers and strive for qualitative diversity.

So, what is qualitative diversity? To understand it, we must realize that it is more than simply ensuring that an organization is comprised of racially and ethnically diverse individuals. It is more than having a good representation of women within an organization.

We must understand that the equation for diversity is not simply:

More minorities + More women = More \$\$\$\$

It is closer to:

Valued employees + diverse perspectives = PRICELESS value to the business

True diversity in a business is comprised of a genuine appreciation, respect and desire for differing mindsets, cultural backgrounds and perspectives. Businesses must move beyond quantitative diversity values and move towards valuing qualitative diversity. Businesses and individuals must begin to see the big picture and understand that “business as usual” does not allow for such progression. Progression in the direction of embracing and valuing qualitative diversity often begins with a change in the culture of an organization.

Inherent biases need to be brought to the forefront. It is no surprise that “like hires like,” meaning that people are naturally drawn to people who are like them. Consequently, the “like hires like” trend can affect both recruiting and retention because non-minority employees may automatically have a competitive advantage over their minority counterparts simply because more opportunities for natural connections may exist. The more people in an organization who are like you (i.e., same socioeconomic background), the more opportunities you have to connect with such people and leverage such connections. This could translate into a non-minority employee receiving more work assignments, better mentoring and faster promotions than a

minority employee. This can be true in the context of race, gender, religious affiliation, sexuality, socioeconomic status or personality.

Consider, for example, the 2007 study by the National Association of Women Lawyers, which found that 84% of equity partners are men and 92% of managing partners are men. If people are constantly allowed to only hire people who are like them, will we ever achieve true diversity? Can businesses create an environment where breaking the “like hires like” trend is permissible and, more importantly, encouraged?

An organization where everyone is the same (e.g., same race, same gender, etc.) is not diverse. Likewise, an organization with individuals who look different, but think and act the same, is not diverse. Qualitative diversity does not exist in a culture where employees are afraid to share perspectives that are unique to them or believe that such perspectives are not appreciated.

How do we shift the focus? We must encourage those who are resistant to diversity to look beyond the numbers and see why qualitative diversity is essential to the success of the business. A shift in focus may help to eliminate the following flawed mindsets about diversity: 1) diversity goals are driven by the need to meet a quota, and 2) standards are lowered in order to hire diverse candidates. Such flawed attitudes may place diverse employees in an environment where they are pegged as “ignorant until proven competent.”

It is wise for businesses to seek to improve their diversity statistics. Nevertheless, although having good diversity numbers is a start, it is not enough. Diverse employees need to see people like themselves who are successful within the organization. Diverse employees need to know that people who are unlike themselves actually do respect them, value their opinions, and want them to succeed. This does not mean that diverse employees need to receive “special” treatment. Rather, efforts should be made to ensure that diverse employees are treated similarly to their non-minority counterparts. At the same time, everyone must recognize that differences exist and respect those differences.

Baker Donelson’s leadership understands that when diverse individuals are made to feel valued, this results in improved morale, increased productivity and greater innovation. This, in turn, enhances the success of our business. We realize that an environment that is hostile about diversity initiatives cannot be tolerated and is detrimental to the firm’s success. We know that diverse individuals who are made to feel ostracized, devalued and inferior will likely fail or leave.

When diverse candidates are hired, we are conscious of the fact that efforts must be made by all to cultivate, develop and mentor diverse employees after they get in the door. Everyone, including diverse employees, must be cognizant of their important role in the cause for qualitative diversity, appreciating the fact that diversity is not just about the numbers. Diverse employees also must take a vested interest in their own happiness and success.

We all must be willing to examine our own biases, strengths and weaknesses. We all must be comfortable with critique, and in seeking mentoring, support and camaraderie from those different from us. We all must be willing to voice our opinions, suggestions and concerns, and to respect the opinions, suggestions and concerns of others.

Baker Donelson has made great strides in promoting diversity and inclusion with efforts such as mandatory firm wide diversity and inclusion training. Baker Donelson leadership also realizes that diverse employees cannot be the only champions of diversity, and has made it clear that diverse individuals with diverse perspectives are valued within the firm. However, we realize that there is much more work to do and we continue to find ways to improve. We all have a role in improving diversity. The numbers, whether good or bad, tell only a fraction of the story. Individually and corporately, we must determine what role we want to have in the remainder of the story. We all must be challenged to look beyond the numbers.