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Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Diversity efforts require sincerity, patience

In this week's Thought Leadership Roundtable, a partner at Taft law firm and the leader of United Northeast Community Development Corp. discuss what it takes to build a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace that is sustainable and brings real value to an organization.

Q: How can organizations incorporate DEI efforts into their workplaces in a meaningful way?

Kiamesha-Sylvia Colom: An important first step is to review hiring practices and training for those involved in the hiring process and reevaluate who participates on the hiring committee. It is critical to have implicit bias training for these

individuals. Once you implement practices for hiring diverse team members, then it is time to focus on equity, inclusion and retaining these team members. Organizations need to focus on making diverse professionals feel part of the team. They can do this by educating their workforces on varying cultural differences and providing training to identify and become aware of these differences. It is important to allow employees



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to be their authentic selves and feel comfortable doing so. I think it's also key for organizations to make diversity fun and recognize different cultures.

Overall, these efforts need to be honest, substantive, and material incorporations of DEI, not superficial. The commitment must be integrated throughout the organization and be a known priority of the organization's leader.

Ashley Gurvitz: An organization can incorporate DEI in a more meaningful way by ensuring efforts not only build new policies and procedures, but also establish better alignment with broader organizational mission and goals. One step is to create a DEI steering committee composed of people within the company and other key partners who are passionately committed to making a difference within the workplace. The committee can help identify ways to support those who might have ideas that haven't been taken seriously because their voice hasn't been the majority voice.

Q: What are some common challenges associated with DEI efforts?

Ashley Gurvitz: One common problem is not taking the time to genuinely believe in the DEI initiatives and expectations an organization adopts. An example would be having a goal of hiring diverse talent but failing to provide clear pathways for talent to be retained or promoted. Whether DEI efforts are well-intended or not, if DEI initiatives are not aligned with specific actionable areas, it is often very hard to hold people accountable. It's also a challenge to make everyone feel safe and like they belong while simultaneously managing inequitable viewpoints that arise within the organization.

Kiamesha-Sylvia Colom: A common challenge with DEI efforts is getting buy-in. The buy-in needs to be substantive and supported with actions. There also needs to be ownership of the identified plan—someone empowered to keep the organization moving forward and also to step in and pivot if things get off course.

Another common challenge is lack of exposure. When there is lack of exposure regarding DEI topics, there tends to be myths that need to be disproven. This can make conversations hard. Organizations need to begin at ground zero to be sure everyone has a

base-level understanding and awareness of these topics.

Q: How much value do you place on diverse leadership and what advice can you offer for organizations that want to diversify their leadership ranks?

Kiamesha-Sylvia Colom: Taft understands that people with diverse experiences bring creative thinking, multiple perspectives, and innovative problem-solving techniques to issues. Diverse leadership groups also outperform homogenous groups. We place a high value on diverse leadership and have made great strides through initiatives led by the firm's Chief Diversity Officer and DEI Strategic Diversity Partner, as well as the firm's Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee, Gender Advancement Committee, and various task forces. Taft has been purposeful in creating diversity in key leadership committees and roles. Our 2022 leadership team is composed of women, team members of color, and other diverse leaders. They account for 74% of our executive committee, 54% of our compensation committee, 45% of our office partners-in-charge, 36% of our practice-group leaders, and 92% of our C-level officer positions.

We know there is more to do, but having measurable metrics is important to identify where an organization has been and how far it has come, and to provide clear direction on what else it needs to do. We have put tools in place that measure the diversity make-up of project and matter teams. We don't simply count different kinds of people on a team. Instead, we consider the hours worked by each team member on a particular project. This is a measurable way for us to be sure there is equity and inclusion in the distribution of work. This is an example of a metric that enables us to move toward a goal of more diverse teams.

For organizations that want to diversify their leadership ranks, it's important to understand that because of cultural norms, some diverse professionals are more likely to wait to be noticed and asked. Organizations need to recognize this and specifically ask these people to step forward and lead.

Ashley Gurvitz: If you draw from the same talent pool you've always used, you will get the same results. You

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have to search for sources of diverse talent and thought. When you find that diverse talent and embed them in your ranks, you'll experience better business results.

Q: What role should mentoring play in developing diverse talent/leadership?

Ashley Gurvitz: It's one thing to know that your workplace has pathways to advancement; it's another to have a mentor who can help you get there. As a young executive, mentoring has become key to affirming I belong at the table where crucial decisions are made. Mentorship has also made it easier to know how to navigate new professional development and leadership pathways.

Kiamesha-Sylvia Colom: Mentoring is key to developing diverse talent and leadership and is critical to the advancement and retention of diverse attorneys and professionals. Mentors need to be chosen carefully and must have a genuine desire to mentor diverse associates. Then a period of relationship-building must take place to establish the trust needed to engage in what will sometimes be awkward and difficult conversations. It is important to have a willingness to be open on both the mentor and mentee sides. To address the willingness factor, Taft created a mentor/champion program for associates from historically underrepresented groups. The program features a panel of partners that associates can turn to for advice, coaching, etc.

Q: How can we address implicit bias in the workplace and break down barriers created by these biases?

Kiamesha-Sylvia Colom: It is important to have consistent training and call out in a neutral way instances where implicit bias may be evident to raise awareness of the bias and

how it can be stopped. Allowing for the creation of a comfortable place to have these conversations is also important because all of the individuals involved need to feel safe and heard so the organization can move toward a more non-biased environment. It is critical for organizations to create spaces that allow for the exchange of ideas, values, and connection points so that people can engage with one another in a holistic, authentic, and natural way where biases can be dissolved over time.

Ashley Gurvitz: One of the best ways to address implicit bias within the workplace is by creating a culture which acknowledges that everyone has them. If an organization acknowledges that everyone has blind areas to grow from, it makes it easier to adopt a work culture that embraces vulnerability and openness in a new light that's not seen as an impediment to the culture's growth. By having the right conversations in the right places, new ideas, opportunities and community growth strategies can be identified collaboratively.

Q: How important is it for CEOs to get out of the boardroom and into their communities?

Kiamesha-Sylvia Colom: It is very important for the CEO/Managing Partner to be involved and support their community, but it's not just the CEO/Managing Partner's responsibility. It goes a lot deeper than one person—at least it does at Taft. Embedded in Taft's culture is the significant investment we make in the communities where we live and practice. Taft attorneys and staff members actively participate in our communities through volunteer projects, pro bono services, financial support and sponsorships, and leadership on various boards of professional, educational, arts,

religious, charitable, and civic organizations.

Being involved in your community makes a leader better. Being a good corporate citizen is paramount and a requirement with younger generations. Besides being the right thing to do and providing you with a sense of community, community involvement makes business sense. It provides you with a connection to customers, a better understanding of what is needed and when, clarity regarding issues that an organization may be working on, and it allows for experiences and perspectives that can give way to innovation and other benefits.

Q: Please give us an example of DEI at work in the community.

Kiamesha-Sylvia Colom: Taft believes it's important to balance the collegiality and other important elements of our culture with the desire to come together as an organization and stand for something meaningful in our community. Since 2011, Taft has contributed and pledged more than \$1.7 million to Ralph Waldo Emerson School 58. Our partnership has focused on supporting an After School Program and providing additional support and resources to IPS 58 students. The program is designed to help students reach their

full academic potential and provide opportunities that would otherwise not be possible. Dedicating resources to early childhood education addresses some of the difficult issues in our elementary schools and helps to address diversity in the workplace beyond race, ethnicity, and gender by looking at diversity on a socio-economic basis as well.

Ashley Gurvitz: One incredible example of DEI at work would be the 38th & Sheridan Project with our valued community partners: Goodwill of Central & Southern Indiana, Cook Medical, Impact Central Indiana, public officials, and most importantly our Northeast Indianapolis residents. Through this partnership collective, we have all gained a DEI mindset and an understanding that the work we do must come from within the community. Beginning with a crucial conversation around George Floyd, we all came to a shared understanding that our work together long-term would be much better than simply cutting a check to help the community. Because of the diverse viewpoints of the people who came to the table, we were able to see that solving complex issues isn't sustainable without drawing on the lived experiences of our neighbors. Understanding those lived experiences helped us walk more intimately with each neighbor.●



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Kiamesha-Sylvia Colom is a partner at Taft who focuses her practice in the areas of real estate transactions, including development, acquisitions, dispositions and leasing; lending and commercial finance transactions; SBA/government guaranteed lending; and related business transactions. She is a member of the firm's Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee and serves on several local boards. She is also an inaugural member of the IndyBar's Hispanic Executive Committee and a past member of the Indy Chamber's HBC Executive Committee.



As the CEO of the United Northeast Community Development Corporation, **Ashley Gurvitz** has a passion for empowering equitable community development opportunities, especially within Northeast Indianapolis. She has worked on various high-level social impact projects, including the ROCK Initiative, Northeast Corridor Quality of Life Planning, the 38th & Sheridan Project, and Equitable Food Access in Northeast Indianapolis.





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Pete Yonkman
President, Cook Group
and Cook Medical