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Diversity In The Legal Profession — A Stubborn Vision

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Some 10 years ago, Rick Palmore was walking back to his office in Chicago from yet another panel discussion on diversity. As always, he had exhorted the audience to take action, but on that walk he stopped and asked himself: “Hey, wait a minute, Palmore, what are you doing?”

That was the “seed,” recalls the former general counsel for General Mills Inc. It led to his writing his powerful and influential “Call to Action” paper, pulling together general counsel and managing partners to think through the vision for a collaborative effort to advance diversity and inclusion in the legal profession.

A vision is a stubborn thing. And in 2009, the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity was born. Rick Palmore, senior counsel at Dentons, was its first chair.

Since its early days, the LCLD has grown and grown dramatically. Its membership is composed solely of general counsel and managing partners, representing the most prominent corporate names in the country and the nation’s leading law firms. Today, we have 90 general counsel members and 180 managing partner members. They are committed, they are smart, and they are ambitious. They are all about our mission: “Leadership. Action. Results.”

They want to see, as one of our founding members, Brad Smith, now president and chief legal officer at Microsoft Corp., once stated, “a legal profession as diverse as the nation we serve.” We are not there yet, far from it, but we are beginning to put some numbers on the board that are exciting and encouraging.

Our flagship program is the LCLD Fellows program. These are attorneys from diverse backgrounds, partners with eight to 15 years’ experience, who have been identified by their organizations — their firms and their corporate legal departments — as rising stars, the next generation of leaders in the legal profession.

Every year, a new class of fellows is selected for a program of professional development, relationship building, and extraordinary access to the leaders of the profession. Today, there are 1,300 of these individuals — women, African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, LGBT and disabilities communities — who are forging a powerful national network. They are helping each other with their careers, providing mutual support, creating “safe spaces” for candid, honest conversations, nudging their own organizations to advance diversity and inclusion, and sharing business leads. They have each others’ backs. And, perhaps most important, they are “paying it forward,” mentoring more junior attorneys and law students and talking to kids in the inner city who had never considered thinking about the law, but should.

A few years ago, I was delighted to learn that the fellows, having completed their year of training, decided to stay in touch with their peers, at first gathering simply for informal get-togethers, but soon organizing into a permanent

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entity: the Fellows Alumni. And (being lawyers) they've created officers, committees, regional structures and local and national sustaining events.

Some of the LCLD fellows have taken the reins of their organizations as general counsel and managing partners. They are quick to credit the fellows program as having played at least a part in that success. Today, that is a small number, perhaps a half-dozen. Tomorrow, it will be larger.

The fellows program is but one aspect of the preparation that the LCLD offers diverse attorneys. We have provided mentors to 4,584 diverse law school students. The LCLD's 1L Scholars program has engaged 1,194 first-year students. Our newest program, Pathfinders, has served 300 diverse associates, individuals who are at a particularly tenuous point in their young careers.

Doing the math, we will soon have 10,000 of what we call "legal role models," individuals who have been touched by LCLD initiatives and equipped to take on new roles and responsibilities to advance diversity and inclusion in the legal profession.

We work hard to find or develop new ideas and when we come across something of value, we share it through our online "What's Working" portal, not only to our members, but to anyone who may benefit. Strategies for rewarding law firms for their gains in diversity, like Microsoft's innovative bonus program, are found on that portal.

We are playing a long game. Early indications are promising. But I don't know when the "tipping point" will occur — when there will be a large enough network of diverse attorneys working their way up the ladders, and when those ladders will be secure and leaning against the right walls.

But we will reach that point.

As Rick Palmore knew, and as we see every day: A vision is a stubborn thing.

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