

Diversity

A Special Report



Time to Call In One of Us

How one firm named a practicing partner to implement its diversity plan.

BY SANDY CHAMBLEE

This summer, Steptoe & Johnson named me as the firm's first chief diversity partner. The fact that I already chaired the firm's diversity committee might make my selection sound like a foregone conclusion. In truth, it is just the deceptively simple summary of a complex, creative, enlightening 18-month process in which we looked at where we were, where we wanted to go, and why.

Diverse, inclusive workplaces do not create or sustain themselves. They require committed leadership, thoughtful planning, and consistent action. Committed leadership is not only the foundation of planning and action; it also drives the changes that diversity demands.

Steptoe's path to selecting a first chief diversity partner mirrored our overall diversity journey—it was natural and unscripted. The selection emerged from direct, candid, often blunt discussions among trusting colleagues steeped in the firm's culture, dedicated to “doing the right thing” and confident that collaboration would lead to the best result.

Through the process of defining the role of a chief diversity partner, Steptoe developed a deeper understanding of how diversity—of race, gender, disability, and sexual orientation—fits into our strategy for the future. No two firms will share the exact same journey, but other firms exploring similar questions may glean some useful insights from our process.

A PLAN

The Minority Corporate Counsel Association and other groups that have evaluated diversity status recognize three stages through which an organization progresses toward a truly inclusive workplace.

In the first stage—compliance—the organization commits merely to increasing the number of minorities and women within its workforce. In the next phase—diversity—the organization commits at a high level to diversity activities, including developing programs to recruit and retain minorities and women. The third stage—inclusion—occurs when an organization integrates diversity initiatives into its long-term strategic plan and measures their success.

In 2006, Steptoe hired a consultant, Arin Reeves of The Athens Group, to assist us in determining our position on that continuum. She surveyed personnel and conducted randomly selected interviews over a four-month period. We recognized some areas for improvement, but wanted the more nuanced insight provided by a thorough assessment. (I say “we” because all the firm's attorneys were invited to participate in the assessment survey and interviews, and to discuss the results in a series of meetings this past spring. However, the guiding hand was the executive committee, aided by the diversity committee.)

The specific findings helped us to better understand our starting point and to develop a comprehensive diversity action plan. That plan addresses retention and advancement, internal diversity education, communication of our diversity commitment internally and externally, and ways to effectively assign specific responsibility for various efforts.

Completing this assessment, drafting an action plan, and vetting it internally took about 18 months. And that brought us to another question: Who should lead the diversity effort?

LEADERSHIP

Steptoe already had a diversity committee, which was deeply involved in the assessment process and which would remain in place. Committees are useful tools for brainstorming ideas, evaluating plans, and setting policies, but they are not as effective at inspiring, managing, or implementing. Our diversity efforts need multiple layers of leadership.

First, the strong, active support of the chair of the firm's executive committee, Roger Warin, was and is crucial. He is the head of diversity. He leads this effort with the same commitment with which he directs many other important facets of firm management.

But in order to direct day-to-day implementation of the diversity plan, we needed a second level of leadership to translate the firm's commitment into consistent action. In considering who should primarily guide Steptoe's diversity efforts, we looked at the many roles such an individual would play. This person would have to lead, plan, evaluate, educate, market, and hold accountable. It was clear early in the discussions that this leader would spend a significant amount of time implementing

the complex network of strategies embodied in the diversity action plan. Thus, a deep and informed commitment to diversity was a key requirement—but not the only one.

Further conversations with the chair and others led to the conclusion that clout in multiple forms was a critical criterion for Steptoe's inaugural chief diversity official. First, this person had to be able to engage the firm owners—i.e., the partners—on their level and to have the stature to get things done. Thus, the chief diversity official had to be, both in name and reality, a chief diversity *partner*.

Second, the chief diversity partner had to be committed to the firm's unique culture, history, and future. Although lawyers are typically quick studies, we decided that the optimal choice was someone who had already spent significant time in the firm.

Third, the chief diversity partner had to possess the strength of character, determination, and persuasive skills to convince others to embrace various aspects of the plan. He or she had to be able to overcome the natural tendency of people everywhere not to do things differently.

On a more pragmatic level, we also considered whether the chief diversity partner should continue to practice law and to whom that person should report to within the firm's management.

Our chair strongly believed that to ensure credibility among the rest of the partnership, the chief diversity partner must remain a practicing attorney. This is somewhat unusual. According to a 2008 survey conducted by the MCCA and the Association of Law Firm Diversity Professionals, the chief diversity professionals for 69 percent of responding law firms had law degrees, but typically did not practice law. Only 14 percent were practicing lawyers with an annual billable requirement. Moreover, 60 percent of the firms had diversity professionals whose full-time job was diversity.

We agreed that the chief diversity partner should report directly to Steptoe's chair and vice chair, rather than to the executive committee or the partnership more broadly, both to underscore the chief diversity partner's importance and to highlight the substantial roles that the very top leadership would continue to play in these efforts.

A CHOICE

I surprised myself when, after weeks of thought and discussion, I finally realized that I was a natural choice for this role. (Our chair said he was not surprised but wondered what had taken me so long.)

Why me? I'm a home-grown partner, first coming to Steptoe as a summer associate in the late 1970s. Clearly, I am committed to the firm.

I'm also committed to the ideal of the inclusive workplace. I've co-chaired the diversity committee for more than two years, initiating and guiding the completion of both the diversity assessment and the action plan. At the same time, I've chaired the hiring committee and, formally or informally, mentored many of Steptoe's diverse attorneys.

The combination of years and experience has taught me how to navigate the existing firm structure—the administrative, financial, hiring, and associate services components—to advance my objectives.

At the top level, I have built a bond of trust with the firm's chair and vice chair. The formal hierarchy that has the chief diversity partner reporting directly to the firm's top leaders will be more than a paper promise of access.

I am a practicing attorney—although the firm has significantly reduced my billable hours requirement to allow me time to undertake diversity initiatives. I still represent clients, work on briefs, worry about deadlines, and experience all the usual ebbs and flows of legal practice.

Finally, I am comfortable in my own diverse skin.

LESSONS SHARED

Consistent with Steptoe's culture, our selection of a chief diversity partner was evolutionary (it took some months), perhaps a bit revolutionary, in that it was in no way rigid or static. A less structured, more collaborative process fit us best. There were many informal conversations between the chairs of the diversity committee and the chairs of the firm, plus formal review and approval by Steptoe's executive committee. As our thinking progressed, our outside consultant helped us to test concepts, reach rational conclusions, and vet candidates.

Sometimes the lack of a direct path to the selection was frustrating. How long would it take to reach consensus and move to the implementation of the action plan? But the process was also creative, engaging, and dynamic. We did not start out knowing exactly what we needed to do, but once we discovered it, we acted decisively and without equivocation.

It is easier for us to understand and appreciate the process in hindsight. Some truths are most visible to us in the rear-view mirror:

- The importance of a strong commitment from the firm's leadership generally and from the firm's chair or managing partner specifically cannot be overemphasized. If the managing partner is lukewarm about the value of diversity to the firm, the particulars of the firm's diversity action plan, or, ultimately, the specific person who will serve as chief diversity partner, then it's all just pretty words on the page. When the firm's chair or managing partner cares, the firm acts.

- There is no "one-size-fits-all" process. A very ordered, formal firm would not fare well with the more casual give-and-take that worked for us. Whatever process is followed, however, must permit the members of the firm to work through the sensitive issues that arise in creating an inclusive workplace.

- Defining the role of the chief diversity partner is not something done once and then forgotten about. Firms must stay flexible and open to retaining, revising, or eliminating diversity initiatives based on constant evaluation and re-evaluation of what works and what does not. Likewise, the chief diversity partner's responsibilities will change with time and experience.

But that should come as no surprise. Diversity itself is an evolving process.

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