LEADING INCLUSION REQUIRES INCLUSIVE LEADERS

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I’m attending the ALA Annual Conference in National Harbor, the first time I have been in ‘attendee only’ mode after years of delivering content in sessions or participating as an ALA volunteer. As soon as I had mentioned that to a colleague my phone rang and I’m discussing the family emergency of the David Brezina session speaker, which is determined by the Foundation each year. Fast forward 36 hours and I’m on stage talking about inclusive leadership in law firms.

It’s simple really, this whole inclusion conversation. It’s about getting past seeing the difference to see the sameness…the human inside all of us. And that’s exactly what makes it hard. We expend a good bit of energy in discernment, in distinguishing ourselves apart from one another. Blue eyes or brown? Blonde or red hair? Those are the easy ones. Smart (which really means as smart as me)? Nicely dressed (do I like your attire)? Personal grooming (beards, tattoos, piercings, what do these mean to me)? These deepen our judgments, which lodge us in separation and eventually create privilege. Privilege is defined as a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group of people.

In the advantage of privilege, we release our empathy, which is our ability to understand the feelings of others. Now the separate feels fine and off we go to function in our lives without knowing that we are attending to the difference. Hence, the significance of having the crucial conversation of inclusion. And, I’m not sure we have that down any more than we have inclusion as a strategy in our organizations. The conversation in National Harbor started in diversity — the difference. Law firms have been attending to their policies around diversity for a long time now. Our opportunity is to change the conversation to focus on inclusion. To approach inclusion proactively and recognize that as leaders we must step up first. That inclusion is a competitive advantage.

Where do you start? It’s going to take courage. Courage to speak up when conversation creates slights. Courage to address inappropriate comments regardless of title or reporting lines. Deloitte studied 1300 employees and this idea of belonging, of feeling included. Eighty percent said inclusion was important. Almost 40% (39%) leave for more inclusion. Twenty three percent already left for more inclusion (30% of that was Millennials in demographic). Here’s the most interesting piece — 71% choose inclusive behaviors over inclusive programs. We want practice over policy. We are good at policy. It’s time for practice. And, if you are playing along the engagement game — what percent of our workforce is currently engaged — we are at about 36%. We can change the future of our firms by engaging our workforce in meaningful ways. It really is good business sense and cents.

How do we do this? Understand your culture. Does your organization have diversity and/or inclusion in the core values it espouses? Remember culture is more about what is rewarded than what is said. And, employees consider inclusive behaviors in choosing their employer. Providing training introduces new knowledge and self-awareness,
and these are foundational to changing behaviors. The lasting opportunity for inclusion happens in the accountability to these behaviors, and the commitment to champion inclusive behaviors, no matter the courage required.

I ended my time on stage in National Harbor with the request that we all look forward, that we practice and play on offense, getting past the reactive policies to govern, and into the proactive behaviors that change your world. One decision, one action, one commitment.

For more information and further reading on Leadership and Inclusion, visit our online library.