

Getting *Everyone* Involved in Diversity

By Chana Garcia

When it comes to driving diversity at the workplace, the little gestures are often the ones that have a lasting impact. Attending a happy hour with an affinity group, reaching out to diverse new hires, or using words such as *guest* or *partner* rather than spouse on a company invite seem like surprisingly simple and understated ways to promote inclusion.

These are just several of the eighty or so action items that appear on Shook, Hardy & Bacon's "Diversity Checklist," a document that is raising the standards when it comes to celebrating multiculturalism and educating staff about the value of diversity initiatives.

The Kansas City-based firm, which has nine offices throughout the United States and abroad and more than 1,500 employees, came up with the list four years ago in response to a request by some of the partners. Many among the senior management wanted to be involved with the firm's diversity efforts, but didn't know how their commitment should take shape.

"The diversity committee started brainstorming about how attorneys could individually contribute to the firm's diversity efforts and support the firm's commitment to diversity," recalls Michelle Wimes, Shook Hardy's director

of strategic diversity initiatives. What started out as ideas scribbled on yellow sticky notes turned into a comprehensive resource that has become the firm's hallmark. "We came up with each idea and realized that we needed to get all the information in one place, in one document," she adds. "Then we said, 'Let's circulate it and find out what the partners think.'"

What happened next took the diversity committee members by surprise: They got complete buy-in. All of the partners were eager to do their part to advance the firm's mission. Each was asked to commit to at least five items on the newly compiled checklist, and nearly all of them pledged to do more. "That first year, we had an amazing response," notes Wimes. "Out of the 142 partners we had then, 76 chose to do 11 or more of the action items, 56 did more than 5, and 10 others met our request to do 5."

The list was such a success that the firm decided to roll it out to the more than 500 lawyers on staff and the summer associates.

Counting on Firmwide Commitment

Today, diversity is part of the Shook Hardy's protocol. Every year in March, an updated checklist is distributed and published on the firm's intranet. Each attorney is expected to personally commit to five to ten items to be

Diversity Checklist



Michelle Wimes



John Murphy



Gay Tedder

accomplished by year's end. Moreover, the firm's leaders have taken the step of integrating how well the action items are executed with compensation and advancement opportunities within the firm.

"Of course, we evaluate attorneys on typical performance metrics," Wimes clarifies. "But our attorneys are also evaluated on their firm citizenship, which includes pro bono work they've done, as well as how active they've been in promoting the firm's diversity initiatives."

The idea behind the mandate is that, by asking individual attorneys to adopt diversity practices into their day-to-day behaviors, the firm as a whole will benefit from the collective participation. In addition, it creates accountability across the board.

Chairman John Murphy sees the impact of the checklist in light of the firm's traditional commitment to diversity, internally and within the profession. "We were certainly happy with where our diversity committee had taken us over the years; we just wanted something that we could use to help our lawyers take our efforts to the next level. Diversity has always been a moral and business imperative, but we wanted something that we could sink our teeth into. Once people started looking at the checklist, for the most part, they agreed to do far more than the five items."

Since it developed the list in 2005, Shook Hardy has shared this best practice innovation with forty other law firms, bar associations, and professional groups. It also

receives regular requests for electronic copies from other supporting organizations, notes Gay Tedder, a partner and chair of the diversity committee. The list is available on the firm's Web site (www.shb.com). Upon obtaining permission from the firm, the list can be adopted in its entirety or customized as needed by other groups. "Other firms can come up with their own action items and develop their own versions," notes Wimes.

While the checklist is at the heart of Shook Hardy's diversity planning, the firm's initiatives are embedded in other practices. For example, the firm hosts workshops at local law schools, including one called "Thinking Like a Lawyer," which are designed to teach critical-thinking skills to aspiring attorneys. And, for the last four years, Shook Hardy has been active in the Heartland Diversity Legal Job Fair. This joint venture among the managing partners of Kansas City's leading firms is aimed at increasing the diversity of legal talent in the area.

For its own staff, the firm has established a Women's Management Council, a committee of female partners who facilitate discussions around the concerns of women practitioners, such as maintaining work/life balance and strategies on how to make partner. Like many other firms, Shook Hardy also holds a yearly diversity retreat for its ethnically diverse employees.

"We've conducted the diversity retreat for the last two years, and it has been extremely successful," explains Tedder. "It's a three-day event that gives us an opportunity

to bring together our diverse attorneys in one location where they can network, meet with partners, and talk about career-trajectory issues. We also bring in clients.”

Inspiring Change from Within

Shook Hardy was among many firms that wanted to be on the front line of change after Roderick Palmore’s seminal essay, “A Call to Action,” pleaded for members of the legal profession to confront the lack of diversity within their own organizations.

The firm’s checklist was in part a response to Palmore’s decree. But that effort paved the way for something even more crucial – a way to examine the progress being made in-house. With its checklist, Shook Hardy created an internal metric that can determine whether the firm’s actions are inspiring real change simply by encouraging a higher level of contribution from everyone.

So, is it working? “Absolutely,” states Wimes. “In 2008, we had 99 percent participation. We look at the checklist as part of the firm’s citizenship requirement.”

Tedder agrees, noting that next year, the list will extend beyond the firm’s attorneys to include the profes-

sional staff as well. “Honestly, I don’t know anyone who looked at this as a burden or an assignment, and that’s because you can pick five very easy things to do from the list. It doesn’t have to be complicated.” But it is clearly impactful.

For Murphy, the checklist represents a classic example of making the business case for diversity. Recently, he shares, Shook Hardy landed a client it didn’t have a few years ago. He’s convinced that the firm’s continued focus on diversity is what tipped the scales. “Our relationship with [the new client] is going to keep more lawyers in their work,” Murphy concludes.

“Everybody has to recognize that by advancing inclusion, you open up the firm to more opportunity, and when you open up the firm to more opportunity, everyone benefits. I’m extremely proud of the message the checklist gets across, and that it keeps people engaged.” **DB**

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