

Defending diversity

Marianne M. Trost, 'The Women Lawyers Coach' reveals how to save your firm's diversity initiatives from downturn-induced cut-backs.

THERE ARE PROACTIVE STEPS you can take to help ensure that the value of your diversity initiative, whether formal or informal, does not get lost in the shuffle, or worse yet, is terminated.

Buy-in from the top is essential to the continued success of any diversity efforts. Don't wait for management to come to you. Instead, initiate a conversation with your firm's leadership about the value of the diversity programme. Openly discuss the ways in which diversity positively affects your firm's culture, business development, client relations, and community outreach, as well as recruiting, retention, mentoring, and professional development.

When citing value, keep in mind that bottom-line financial impact is a more pressing consideration than it was even one year ago. Yes, diversity programmes are so much more than statistics, but in a down economy it is important to articulate the value of your efforts using facts, figures, and hard data. This is the language of the day.

To help demonstrate the business impact of your programme, consider compiling a list of key clients who have requested your firm's diversity information or who have indicated that diversity is a factor when selecting legal counsel. If you have firm revenue figures that tie to those clients, keep them to hand. If you have attracted new clients to the firm in part because of your diversity efforts, highlight these successes. And don't limit your data to 2008. Demonstrate lasting value.

Encourage your firm to take a longer term view. Firms that take a short-term approach will be increasingly disadvantaged when the economy turns. Consider providing management with a summary of the risks involved when diversity efforts cease, for example reduced staff retention rates, increased costs associated with subsequent diversity recruiting and re-training, loss of valued clients, loss of competitive advantage, decline in firm morale, reduced visibility in the broader community, and a narrowing of the

valuable perspectives and experiences that clients require of their legal counsel.

Communicate not only the business imperatives of diversity but the less tangible benefits as well. Cite examples of the opportunities, public recognition, awards, and increased visibility that your female and minority lawyers have brought to your firm. If more women and minorities have assumed leadership positions in your firm, acknowledge it. If your firm's retention has improved, demonstrate the positive trend. Don't assume that management already has this information at its fingertips.

Offer suggestions on how you and others involved in diversity efforts can assist management in reviewing other policy changes that may be currently under consideration. Express a willingness to serve as a resource. Cite your proven track record addressing tough issues and finding solutions that benefit the firm as a whole.

Lead by example. Set the tone for inclusiveness, positive outlook, and consensus oriented change. The special strengths that women and minorities have developed during their own encounters with adversity can be a valuable asset when used to help management lead a firm through hard times. Offer to be part of the solution. Utilise your 'down time' to further the goals of your firm's female and minority employees, with or without a formal programme.

Challenging times can often lead to increased receptivity to new ways of doing things. Stay engaged and ensure you remain part of the dialogue. Your ability to stay committed to diversity will not only positively impact the women and minorities in your firm, but also your firm's client base, the business community at large, and the global community as a whole. Now, more than ever, is the time to work together toward making a positive difference. [WOMENLEGAL](#)

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