



DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Are diversity and inclusion part of your organization's culture? There is little consistency in what constitutes a workplace's culture message, and it can be articulated anywhere from one sentence to hundreds of pages, depending on the organization. In general, organizations have prioritized communicating their commitment to and belief in a diverse workplace. But does everyone on the team understand what "diverse" and "inclusive" means within their workplace? And how does – or should – leadership demonstrate that commitment across the organization?



From left: DeVon Jackson, Marie Holliday, Cheryl Ecton and Philip Amoa. | Photo by Eric Crossan

Let's start off the discussion with how you individually make a case for diversity and inclusion, and why you think it's so important in the workplace.

DeVon Jackson: Considering the different difficult perspectives we have out there, I think inclusive behaviors are warranted. Understanding the meaning of diversity and inclusion and equity as three halves of a whole is imperative for the growth and/or maturity of our nation.

Marie Holliday: I want to be representative of the people that I'm serving. If you exclude a group or a gender, any identity, you're excluding the opportunity to serve that type of population.

Cheryl Ecton: By being diverse in the workplace you also bring different ideas that might not be here otherwise. I think that gives you the ability to think outside the box and think

differently than you would normally do, with a lot of different perspectives.

Philip Amoa: I would echo what Cheryl just said. As an attorney, I get to represent boards of directors. Having a diverse workforce, even from the legal perspective, gives you different perspectives, right? On how to attack or solve an issue, and in most cases prevent issues from happening. If you don't have diverse people in the boardroom, you tend to gloss over issues that could potentially be issues in different cultures or with different groups of people.

Tell me about the changes in your individual careers in your industry, from when you started to where you are now and how it's changed.

Holliday: When I first got into public accounting, it was very

a male-dominated industry. There were very few working women in the industry, and it was very difficult to hit that glass ceiling and not advance just because you had a family. The industry was known for long hours with no flexibility and no respect of different ways to work. So, if you weren't there at 8 in the morning and work 'till 8 at night, you weren't valued as an employee. A lot of those people had spouses that worked at home, so they didn't have to deal with the two-family working income earners, and it took a while for firms to adapt to that. As a result, you didn't see a lot of females in the workplace. So, there's very few females that are in managing director positions or even in partner positions in the accounting industry, but it's starting to change, but it's still very, very slow.

How are you changing that landscape in your firm?

Holliday: Very early on when I was at Cover & Rossiter, I had my third child and I was just like, “I don’t know that I can stay in this industry and work those hours.” At the time I thought they’d never let me work from home. This is over 20 years ago. I went to them and said, “Would you consider me working remotely one day a week?” And at that time, you had these big audit bags and you’re carrying them around, the idea of being able to take client files home was a little scary. But I went in and I asked them, I asked only for one day and they gave me two. So that was really a big deal for me. I ended up staying with the firm and then advanced to the managing director position, but if I didn’t have that opportunity at the time, I probably wouldn’t have stayed. So now our firm is very good at allowing people to work from home, mothers, fathers, it doesn’t matter who you are.

Amoa: Unfortunately, the legal profession is still not a diverse profession, and I think you see that in the ranks of partnership across major law firms around the country. To Marie’s point on getting to work from home – if you look at diversity of thought from an age perspective, you do find now that millennials want to work from home and want slightly more flexibility. That’s a little bit of a shift in culture in law firms, where some of the more senior partners are used to people actually being in the office and getting a lot of face time. I think we’re starting to see more of a shift where a lot of attorneys get to work remotely and have more flexible work hours. If you look at McCarter’s senior leadership ranks, we have a number of female managing partners and practice group chairs, and so we’re starting to see that change at that senior level. And the hope is that if you institute change at the senior level, it will flow throughout the entire firm.

Ecton: When I started my career, being a woman in my industry was not really normal, I was a minority as well, because in a commercial, industrial field of janitorial services, it’s very male-dominated. There’s a lot of women that have house-cleaning companies and go the residential route, but not very many women in the commercial industry. It’s still that way. I was very surprised just a couple years ago – I went to a CEO conference, and I was shocked to see only one other female in a leadership role. I wasn’t going into an existing business where there was not diversity. It was created initially in my company. I have just as many women in leadership roles in my company as I do men. I have all ethnic backgrounds, white, black, and Hispanic women.

DeVon, your title invokes diversity not just for the faculty, but also the curriculum for the students. Tell us a little bit about how that has changed in education.

Jackson: So, unfortunately it hasn’t in education, at least in my kind of work with diversity and inclusion. So, it hasn’t been any big change in the sense that you’re learning about anything other than the European perspective. So, I think

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– DEVON JACKSON

that what needs to change is realizing that you could learn the same thing from a rap song from artists like Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole that you learn from William Shakespeare. You could learn the same thing from under-represented identities like Maya Angelou than some other poet in their subject matter. What hasn’t changed is this idea of the predominant race in school. Every school I’ve been to, there was a predominant race and I think more diversity in numbers and who the students are in the classroom makes a huge deal to what and how people are learning. It makes a huge deal to the atmosphere.

I’ve grown up in Catholic school my entire life and each Catholic school has been a predominantly white space. Which I get. I’m not saying that there weren’t any people of color, but it was very, very small. So, that makes a case for how students of color see themselves, how they learn. I don’t know if you saw the picture of the young boy when President Obama was in office. There’s a picture of him leaning down with his hands in his pocket and there’s this young black child touching President Obama’s head like, “Oh my God, you look like me.” It’s wow, you’re real. So, people can’t be what they can’t see.

If you have a teacher who is woke, if you will, a teacher who is culturally competent, they add things to their own curriculum, but for the most part I think there needs to be a bigger change. Some schools do it really well, but I think most schools need some educational revamping.

Holliday: I have a question for you, because I’m trying to do more diversity in my firm. The AICPA is doing a diversity and inclusion program and we became one of five



DeVon Jackson. | Photo by Eric Crossan

firms across the country that were selected for this George Willie scholarship, where it’s supposed to take economically disadvantaged groups and try to find opportunities for them to come in the industry. And so, I think I’ve done a good job on women, but I haven’t necessarily done a great job in the African American community or the Hispanic community. How do we make that change and what can we do as a firm or a law firm or accounting firm or another firm to make people feel welcome? That’s not to say that I don’t have that in my workforce, because I probably have a more diverse workforce than most accounting firms in Wilmington, but I don’t feel I’m making the inroads and how do I make people feel comfortable and feel that they have opportunities? Can we start at schools like Sallies or inner-city schools and have some kind of a mentorship program in addition to these scholarship programs so that students can find out these great opportunities.

Jackson: I guess I will answer that question by saying, “How are you an ally?” or “How do you perform as an ally?” Ally is

MEET THE PANELISTS



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Philip Amoa is a partner at McCarter & English, practicing out of the firm’s Wilmington and Philadelphia offices. His area of focus is corporate, M&A, and some early-stage venture capital.



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DeVon Jackson is director of diversity and inclusion at Salesianum School in Wilmington.



Philip Amoa. | Photo by Eric Crossan

a verb as well, and when we think of allyship, we understand what the word ally means... being a friend, being an aid, but there are some interesting dynamics that go along with being ally. First an ally is a person who belongs to the dominant group or identity. If I go to a predominately white school, the ally will be the white person in the school working for those under-represented communities. Secondly, an ally is a person who rejects or gets rid of dominant ideologies. If I want to be an ally, I need to reject those things within the organization or institution's culture that are making the under-represented groups feel isolated or marginalized. Certain policies or procedures perhaps.

Thirdly, allyship is working in support of or as an advocate for or with specific groups of specific or marginalized groups. How do you do that? How do you present yourself as an ally? Since Salesianum is predominantly white, in the beginning of the year I hosted a reception for freshmen and transfers who were from under-represented communities. I asked our white Dean of Students, our white Principal, and some other folks who are white, to be present. I had them come because I wanted the students to meet them and get to know their faces so they don't come thinking that "the odds are already against me." When you live in a nation where the dominant narrative isn't so positive for some of our communities, you have to be intentional with how you are welcoming. You have some people here who are ready to support you regardless of how you look like, and so that perception happens sometimes. So I try to position people to see that this is my ally.

So, I guess I would ask you – obviously it's rhetorical – but how do you position yourself to make a person feel welcome? Are you in the kitchen cooking when you ask them to come to the door or when they come to the door, are you like, "Welcome, please take your shoes off, relax, kick your feet up." What are you doing to make them feel welcome? Or is it just a matter of have them come and adhere to what we have in our company? Do we fix our place so that the under-represented feel represented? Does a mouse invite an elephant to its home and change the door so the elephant can get in, or has [the elephant] just got to figure it out?

Holliday: Well, like I said, the AICPA did this really large toolkit and handed out a lot of things, unconscious bias, things that we should do as a firm, we're trying to adopt a lot of that, but those things take time to change prejudices, to change our thinking, and in the meanwhile, how do we make people feel more welcome? My experience is a lot different than yours, and so how do we make people when they come in from day one feel like they're a part of our firm? That's where we have to do a better job as a whole, because I think although we've done a great job with our female

population and we have a lot of Asian people that work at our firm, we have not had that same success in other under-represented groups. Some of it I do think is our industry as a whole because we also have gotten ourselves in a situation where I think that changing to a five year, 150-hour college degree program has limited our pool of candidates, because I surveyed kids when this happened that weren't African American and I said, "If you knew that it was a five year program to become a CPA, would you have chosen this?" And they're like, "No way." So we've done this to ourselves so we're not getting students, but we need to find creative ways to encourage people of all races, female, male, whatever, to get into that industry because it is a great career, like an attorney or like any job, as long as you're getting a productive job where you can support your family, whatever that is, how do we get to those groups and make them feel more welcome and included in that?

Who is driving this? HR? Is it organic within the minority demographic within the organization? Does it come from top down?

Ecton: I think It comes from top down.

Holliday: I think it comes from me. I mean, I'm the managing director; I think you have to start from the top. I think the leader has to have that vision and show that they believe in this, otherwise it's not going to work. Obviously, you've done a really good job because it sounds like you have very diverse workforce.

Ecton: I'm sitting here and thinking about this and I don't understand discrimination whatsoever. I have a very diverse family. My sister married a black gentleman who's from South Africa and has a Muslim family. My father is a Baptist minister. You can't get too much more different. My boyfriend's sister is a nun. You come to Thanksgiving at my house it is extremely diverse, and there is no prejudice.

Amoa: I was going to say from our perspective at McCarter, diversity and inclusion has been a strategic initiative of our Executive Committee. That's coming from the top down. It is important to the firm's commitment of resources to ensure we're able to recruit, retain and advance diverse lawyers. And just to touch on the question that was raised earlier about how to make people feel welcome once you get them in, I think it's not enough just to recruit people to the firm. As an attorney, I talk to other diverse lawyers at other firms and the story is very similar. You get into a good firm and get a good-paying job, but you're not getting put on the fancy deals, you're not getting put on the important client work. Then two or three years down the road, all of a sudden you're

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– PHILIP AMOA

not up to par with some of your contemporaries, and you're out the door.

I think when you talk about the case for diversity, it's also good business to ensure you're treating people fairly, otherwise you can end up exposing yourself to litigation. But in our case, when we brought in a high-school student as a summer intern at McCarter, there was really little he could do on his own. What we did differently is the attorneys took him to court appearances and took him to meetings, and that's how you start to feel included. You start to feel like you're part of the team. It wasn't a surprise that each summer we were able to bring him back, and eventually he pursued law and came back as a full-time associate.

What strategies from the top down do we really need to institutionalize in the culture? Are there particular things that you have in place that have helped you grow your business in general, but also that diverse workforce?

Holliday: I'm struggling with that whole concept of ROI. People helped me along the way. I need to pay it forward. I didn't really look at it from a perspective of a guaranteed return on my investment, it's just the right thing to do. ROI wasn't really in my mindset. I'm more of along the line of like saying, "this is our goal. This is what we're going to do initially." Our initial goal was we're going to use this diversity and inclusion tool kit. We're going to participate in the scholarship, we're going to try to be different, we're going to start recruiting at historically black colleges and universities. How are we going to make people feel more welcome? We are going to hire a more diverse workforce. When those candidates come here, what are we going to do different? I don't care if we do a little bit more for those candidates because they need to feel included.

Amoa: I think I would look at some of the programs and initiatives that we currently have. McCarter recruited at the Minority Job Fair at Widener, where students from around the country who were interested in practicing in Delaware could apply to firms for potential summer associate positions. Even though I was in college in the area, I went to law school in Illinois. I found this minority job fair, applied for it and interviewed with McCarter and got an offer. I'm now a partner at the firm. So, from that perspective, I think the firm would agree with the success of some of our programs.

Jackson: What does positive look like? Is putting a whole program together for maybe one person to come to our firm? Is that a big return or a small return considering that you may have had none before and you had one come out and you spend thousands of dollars on it? I think I would look at it as a big return because of what you're valuing in that person coming in, that person brings different perspective like Cheryl talked about before. So, I think that return piece was like, I don't know, however, at Sallies what we're doing is trying to go into spaces and recruit and do things to bring the people into a Salesianum.

We do a stand-and-deliver speech competition with our students, and these are first-time visitors to Salesianum school. They say, "Oh wow, I've driven by, but I've never been here." So now we've gotten some of those folks from some of those families who were here doing the stand-and-deliver speech competition to come to open house the next day. Going to specific schools where we haven't gone before, partnering with specific schools. One of the teachers asked me about a program where their high-achieving students can go to a specific high school and take upper-level classes, and I'm like, "Oh my God, this is a great idea."



Marie Holliday. | Photo by Eric Crossan

Amoa: As a follow-up on the ROI component, the only reason I think that's valid is the folks in this room get it, right? But sometimes we're talking with people who may not really understand why diversity is important. For that reason, showing a business justification for diversity helps.

DeVon, from a recruiting standpoint, how are you instilling the diverse requirement in faculty?

Jackson: It's really hard to do that. When I think about diversity in a school, this may not be popular but I am more interested in a person who's culturally competent than under-represented. I would love to have more people of color, more women in our space. At the same time, I would not want to bring them on just for the optics. I need them to be culturally competent, because if you come to a space and you don't understand, you are perpetuating the challenges and obstacles that need to be eradicated. I am constantly thinking of strategies and things now so that we can attract those folks of those under-represented communities to come to Salesianum. It's challenging when places are more competitive with salary and other benefits. It's really difficult to do that. When a position opens up, I literally go on Facebook and tell them we got a position here.

Holliday: Well, I think you had some great comments on making sure that the people are given the opportunities. I think sometimes just because we've experienced this at our firm, we have a lot of Asian-Americans who were not born here. They have an accent, they have some language barriers in there. And so, when they come in, sometimes

people perceive them as not as smart, but in fact they're extremely bright, even though they may not be as articulate as someone who is U.S.-born and raised. We also help them, it's a hard conversation to have with someone to say, "Hey, your language skills aren't up to snuff." We're willing to say to them, "Hey, I really think that you need to take a writing class." Giving those tools to those people I think is very helpful, and them knowing, Marie really cares that I come across as articulate and well-spoken.

Amoa: You could look at that as a different strategy because now you have access to a whole different market. We have folks from all sorts of backgrounds at McCarter, and that gives us access to a different demographic with different opportunities. But for diverse attorneys, people in management need to ensure they're put in a position to also succeed.

Ecton: We've tried to do a lot of promoting from within, and obviously our workforce is a very diverse group. We've tried to look at those who really outperformed in the field and move them up into management. And it is about putting people in a position that they can succeed at. If you've got a problem, don't bring me a problem unless you can bring me a potential solution. If you bring me a solution, even if it's not the right solution, it's at least allowing them to get involved, to be creative, to come up with ideas, to feel part of the team.

Jackson: Cheryl reminds me of my mentor, who said that people do what they intend to do. I'm on the board at my high school alma mater, Archbishop Carroll, and I'm the only person of color on the board ... for now. There's a diversity group at the school and the person who advises the group came to me and said, "Some of our black students said they got me because they got their token." That's exactly what they said. I heard that they said that. So I'm like, even before hearing that, my intent was to be a resource for the entire school especially the students, but after hearing that, I'm like, "Oh good, I need to help them see what my intent is or what I intend to do with this position that I'm in so that they do not see a token, so that stereotype doesn't perpetuate and continue."

What's the best piece of advice that you would give a growing company who's getting started with the strategy of diversity or inclusion?

Ecton: Again, it needs to come from the top. I think everyone needs to be supportive of diversity and inclusion. I set the culture here and I know not everybody is in that position to be able to do that. You have to make sure that your guiding principles as a company include diversity and inclusion, and that it's followed all the way through.

Amoa: I would take the bet that a diverse team and workforce would outperform a non-diverse team on any day. I mean, I think when you have people in the room that come from different backgrounds – race, gender, culture, diversity of thought, age – you're going to get a richer set of perspectives. I'm a member of the National Association of Corporate Directors and member directors are pushing for diversity as a strategy because even at that board level, a diverse workforce is going to do better and have better products. You're going to be able to communicate better with your stakeholders, and you're going to outperform.

Jackson: I'm going to steal something from a Delawarean, Bryan Stevenson, author of "Just Mercy." He has four ways



Cheryl Ecton. | Photo by Eric Crossan

to change the world, four ways to keep the dream alive. He starts off with proximity, of being closer to the problem. If companies want to be diverse, they need to understand what the problem is that causes them not to be diverse or causes under-represented communities to not come to the company.

The second one is changing the narrative. That dominant narrative is always there; it's in this room right now, in the empty chair. If there's a dominant narrative about specific things, we need to understand what that narrative is so that we can change it.

The third one is staying hopeful, looking at those areas that are positive. And the last one I alluded to earlier was doing some uncomfortable things. Don't be afraid to be a little uncomfortable, because it's going to help change things.

Holliday: I'm glad you picked me last, because I really needed to think deeply. Talk is cheap. I'm not an activist but I feel like our society is becoming more diverse. If you don't adopt diversity, you are not going to be able to be successful, because your clientele isn't going to be there, you're missing on a whole, a group of potential clients, potential workers just all over. We are in an environment where there's a lot of people that don't have jobs and we have a duty and an obligation to help people around us.

Ecton: I think the biggest thing is you have to be open to change and you won't have a change if you don't have different ideas. If everybody is just like you and thinks just like you, you're just going to stay where you are. I think it's really important to be open to different ideas and you're only going to get that with a diverse background. ■

THANK YOU TO OUR PARTICIPANTS

