

Continuing the Diversity Conversation

OUR INTERVIEW WITH RUTH FRY, CHAIR, COMMITTEE ON DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

“As leaders of our firms, we should be the diversity and inclusion champions in our organizations,” Ruth Fry says. “Start by getting the conversation going. The conversation will invite some self-evaluation, and may lead to awareness that there is a non-level playing field, and something needs to change.” Fry is the Chair of ALA’s Committee on Diversity and Inclusion. She and eight other, as she says, “fabulously dedicated committee members,” work to develop and provide educational resources on diversity and inclusion to ALA members.



For diversity-related initiatives to be successful in the legal field, Fry says, “Diversity and inclusion must be a core value in any organization.” She adds, “In order to do that, one must have buy-in from top leadership. Without it, your plan is doomed. Be sure to have your managing partner or executive director solidly on board first. Change will take time and effort.”

What else does Fry have to say about diversity in the legal space and the work of her committee? Continue reading to find out.

1. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE GOALS OF THE COMMITTEE ON DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION?

We aim to support chapters by phone and on-the-road visits, and serve as a key resource to ALA members on diversity and inclusion initiatives. ALA’s Diversity and Inclusion Scorecard is a tool that chapters, firm administrators and managers can utilize to assess and plan next steps in advancing their diversity and inclusion programs.

2. CAN YOU DEFINE DIVERSITY AND WHAT IT MEANS IN THE LEGAL ENVIRONMENT?

Diversity simply means, “difference.” We all bring our own uniqueness and background to enrich the workplace. Bringing difference to the workplace also brings increased productivity and increased morale for everyone. It is more than that, though. To have a diverse workforce, personnel must be open and accepting of everyone.

In the legal industry, a growing number of our clients require a diverse workforce and, therefore, we should require it. Our clients are no longer middle-aged white men — they have diverse backgrounds and are women; women of color; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender

(LGBT); and people with disabilities. Our clients want to work with and see personnel who they can relate to.

3. WHAT DIVERSITY-RELATED ISSUES ARE LEGAL PROFESSIONALS FACING TODAY?

[A discussion presented by the Institute for Inclusion in the Legal Profession and the National Association of Women Lawyers] centered on the fact that lawyers who are white women or women of color face many of the same challenges within the legal profession: They are under-represented! However, the affinity group for women generally does not tackle race issues relating to women lawyers, and minority women lawyers tend to align with minority issues, rather than the women's affinity group. There are not enough minority attorneys to participate in both; they have to choose one or the other due to time constraints.

Women and minorities continue to struggle to have a seat at the table in large corporations and as partners in law firms. Retaining our diverse workforce continues to be a struggle. Finding a balance between attracting and retaining diverse employees is key.

4. WHAT ADVICE OR TIPS WOULD YOU GIVE AN ALA MEMBER LOOKING TO ENHANCE DIVERSITY IN HIS OR HER FIRM?

Maintain a work-friendly culture. Support staff and lawyers should be invited to events where they can get to know each other better. Consider a breakfast or a happy hour every quarter attended by all.

Examine your firms' practices with regard to how work is delegated. Who goes on pitches and who gets the lion share of work? Be sure to examine your own practices. For example, take a step back and think about which candidates' resumes makes it to the top of the pile? Does the name sound American, do you put an ethnic name to the side, or perhaps someone who does not live in a well-to-do neighborhood. Ask yourself, am I truly looking for the best candidate? One administrator friend suggested that he redacts the names from all resumes received to avoid making those assumptions. Not a bad idea, huh?

As firm leaders, we should continue to educate our personnel on unconscious bias and how to counteract stereotypes. We need to be more understanding of the fact that we all have unconscious biases simply because we see life through our own distinct lens. This impacts how we perceive and see people we meet for the first time.

5. ANY OTHER CLOSING THOUGHTS?

Biases can affect everything from first impressions to employment decisions. Consider exposing yourself to different groups and cultures as they may challenge your biases. For example, if you are a LGBT employee, join one of the affinity groups focused on race and ethnicity. By joining these different groups, you may feel uncomfortable at first, but the opportunities will allow you to expand your experiences and become more understanding of others.

LOOKING FOR ADDITIONAL RESOURCES?

Use the [Diversity Toolkit](#) on the [ALA website](#) for ideas on how to institute or grow your program. Use the [Law Firm Scorecard](#) as a benchmark.

Also, be sure to read the [July issue of Legal Management](#), which tackles workplace acceptance for transgender employees, age-related discrimination, gender billing discrepancies and the business case for tolerance.



RUTH FRY
Chair, Committee on
Diversity and
Inclusion