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Diversity Is Being Invited to the Party; Inclusion Is Being Asked to Dance

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Vernã Myers

Vernã Myers, Esq., principal of Vernã Myers Consulting Group, LLC (VMCG), is a nationally recognized expert on diversity and inclusion within law firms, law departments, and law schools.

From *Moving Diversity Forward: How to Go From Well-Meaning to Well-Doing*, Chapter 1

- Learn the difference between diversity and inclusion.
- Realize that you can't change without changing.
- Find out what inclusion requires from organizations and individuals.

I always open my diversity workshops by introducing myself as a "recovering attorney." I don't know who coined that term, but it describes me perfectly. I practiced law for six years, but for more than eighteen years of my professional life I have been advising organizations on issues of diversity and inclusion. My work has been about helping institutions—founded, shaped, owned, and dominated for a long time by white men—to create more welcoming and supportive work environments for everyone, especially people of color, women, and, more recently, those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT), and disability communities. I have also worked to encourage and help open-minded and caring white people to go beyond the superficial and distanced relationships that sometimes exist between black and white people at work, in our neighborhoods, in our schools, and in other areas where we come together.

As a diversity consultant, my clients have ranged from the largest and most prestigious law firms in the country, to mid-size and

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About GPSolo eReport

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small firms, educational institutions, major corporations, and non-profits. Everywhere that I have consulted, I encounter good, well-meaning, smart, bright, affluent white people who ask me to tell them what they could do to increase diversity in their workplaces, their kids' schools, their board of directors, their faculties, etc. Many of them are motivated by their own moral code, their own sense of what is fair. Diversity is simply the "right thing to do." Others want to be the employer of choice, to attract talented individuals of every background, especially millennials, who may be more interested in working in a diverse environment. Some are looking for diversity to bring new skills, competencies, and networks to their organizations; some are compelled by gaining access to different markets in different parts of the country and the world. Recently, law firms have stepped up their emphasis on diversity because many of their clients have begun insisting on it. Some of these clients are presenting cases in front of diverse groups of jurors and/or are trying to make sure the legal advice they receive includes a diverse set of perspectives. I have also worked with people who believe that diversity fosters a more creative, innovative, and effective organization.

However, I have discovered that most often when they say "diversity," it is a code word for "race"; and by race, they mean "black or African American." When they say, "We can't find any 'qualified diverse candidates,'" they usually mean, "We can't find black people who meet our 'standards.'" When it comes to recruiting for diversity, what they don't realize is they are looking for black people in the wrong places. They are searching for them in the same neighborhoods, organizations, schools, and networks from which the white candidates have come. They have limited their search to the places they know and trust and are unaware of the vibrant and diverse networks existing outside of their experience.

Sometimes, even when I offer information about other possible places to recruit, I hear, "We interviewed (or hired) one person from there, and we weren't very impressed, so we aren't going to try that again." They view unqualified white candidates as individuals, but black prospects become representative of their whole group. The unconscious racism that I mentioned earlier and that we will talk about extensively in this book causes them to question and undervalue these other resources and candidates who might emerge from such networks. Some of my clients, who may have figured out the recruitment piece, get stuck on how to handle the racial issues that may emerge now that they have hired black people into their organization. A manager will ask me how she should approach a situation involving an African American employee. When I ask her if she has considered the possibility that race may be influencing the dynamic, her reaction is usually, "Well, I hope not." So I have to remind some white managers that "hoping" race is not a factor in a workplace issue with a black

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Rick Bright, Managing Editor
American Bar Association
321 N. Clark St.
Chicago, IL 60654-7598
Phone: 312-988-6083
Fax: 312-988-6135

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American Bar Association
Solo, Small Firm and General Practice Division

Jeffrey M. Allen, Editor-in-Chief
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person is not an effective management strategy. I tell them, "You can't assume race, but you can't hide from it either."

Why Black and White?

My clients are also concerned about increasing the representation and retention of other historically excluded groups, such as LGBT individuals, Asians, Latinos, multiracial individuals, and women. For several reasons, however, I have chosen to focus this book on issues between black and white people and the retention and advancement of blacks in predominately white institutions. First, I want to address the diversity area where most of my clients have made minimal progress, especially given how long black people (at least black men) have been working in the corporate arena. While my clients seem more optimistic about the success of their diversity efforts with regard to other underrepresented groups, they know they have a problem with retaining and advancing black people. In some industries, such as in the legal field, many are genuinely concerned that they may be actually losing ground when it comes to blacks.¹

Many of my clients believe that their ability to bring in and advance black people is the real litmus test for their diversity efforts. They feel a responsibility, given all the struggles that have been fought by black, white, and other people to create racial equity, to continue until we see black people as a group thriving in these environments. My clients see that even though there has been some forward movement integrating and advancing black people within their organizations, there are still perplexing problems that seem to make it impossible for them to retain a critical mass of black individuals at the managerial and executive levels. Even at this time in the history of the United States, when we have a black President, a black Attorney General, black megastars, and well-paid athletes and entertainers, the corporate workplace still seems to resist the changes that would better integrate, cultivate, and elevate black talent.

I have also chosen to focus on the black and white issue because I think it is emblematic of the many other important problems regarding other marginalized groups in the workplace and in our society. Despite what some of my clients believe, I know that the environment for other underrepresented groups is not as rosy as they perceive, and from what I have been able to see, it isn't just a "matter of time."

The number of white women thriving in corporate America has increased greatly in the last 30 years, but the maternal wall is still extremely difficult to surmount and gender bias continues to impede women's access to the very top of corporate institutions. I have seen little evidence that most women are able to advance without being willing and able to imitate men and embrace a male model of success. Asians (as large and diverse as that grouping is



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in itself), unlike blacks who feel like everything they do is overly scrutinized, wrestle with not being seen at all—some have said they are the “invisible minority.” Latinos are severely underrepresented in many industries and graduate schools, and subgroups like Mexicans and Puerto Ricans encounter some of the same obstacles as African Americans. Plenty of gay employees are closeted or careful about in whom they confide because they worry that their identity may make building and sustaining relationships more difficult. Individuals with physical disabilities are rarely seen in the many institutions I advise.

You will see that, throughout the book, I have used examples and stories that include all types of diversity. It is hard not to draw the many parallels between blacks and other racial and ethnic groups and other traditionally excluded groups. Their experiences are shaped and limited by the same barriers that blacks confront: the “isms” (racism, sexism, heterosexism, elitism, etc.), lack of awareness, discomfort with difference, stereotypes and bias, and systems and practices that reinforce those already in positions of power and exclude others who have been regarded as “less than” or outside the norm. I have watched individuals in these groups, just like blacks, expend great energy trying to “fit in,” by minimizing their differences in order to succeed and to make others comfortable with them.

The issues confronting blacks and other marginalized groups converge a great deal; yet, I believe there are issues unique to black people that make it hard for many of them to thrive in majority white institutions. I wanted to be able to talk about and offer solutions to those distinct hurdles. My hope is that if we can untie this knot of black and white issues through awareness, knowledge, skill, and action, it will help create institutions of inclusion for all groups.

Lastly, I have narrowed the discussion to black and white because I am black.² As a black person, I can speak with the most authority about my experience working and consulting in the corporate environment and living in the United States of America. That is not to say that my experience is every black person’s experience. I do believe that many black people share a cultural background and have a common experience with regard to racial prejudice in this country. However, black people are not a monolithic group; they are individuals, and they also have various group identities.³ I imagine that if you are a black person reading this book or if you are picturing a certain black person, many of my descriptions of black culture or issues encountered by blacks will resonate with you. However, it also may be true that the racial identification and life experiences put forth in this book are very different than you have known or seen. I think this underscores the heterogeneity that exists among blacks. For white readers, remembering to regard each black person as an individual, not just as a member of

a racial group, will be extremely important to keep in mind as you seek to be more proactive in creating inclusion across racial lines.

Also, for white readers who may be accustomed to seeing themselves and being regarded by others as individuals, the challenge will be to explore your identity as a member of a racial group that shares some common experiences, cultural patterns, and issues.⁴ If you are a white person or you are picturing a certain white person when reading this book, you may find descriptions of white people here that you cannot relate to personally. There will be other times when you will see yourself or the white people you know right in the center of these pages. Feel free to ignore what seems foreign and focus on the situations that ring true. All people—black, white, and individuals of all races and ethnicities—get to define for themselves the group or groups to which they belong and whether race or ethnicity is relevant to how they identify at all. I am also very aware that there is really only one race—the human race. There are no subspecies of humans; humans are 99.9% identical genetically.⁵ What we call race in our society is not biological. It is a rather modern, social construct that assigned superiority and inferiority to groups based on physical characteristics.⁶ *However, while race isn't real, racism is.* Centuries of declaring the white race as superior and embedding and supporting that hierarchy through laws, policies, and practices has and continues to have a huge influence on black people's access to opportunity and life outcomes. We cannot correct for racism by ignoring race.

Diversity vs. Inclusion

My goal is to help well-meaning white people, like my clients, erase the impact of racism. I am talking not only about eliminating barriers in the workplace; I want to give conscious and caring white people, like my friends, the skills to cultivate rich, rewarding, and meaningful relationships across race.

I think most of my clients and friends would agree with these goals. However, as I have discovered after working hard in this area for many years, diversity, at least in the way we have thought about the idea up until now, can only take us so far toward these objectives.

Our diversity efforts have been focused on identifying underrepresented groups and bringing them into the workplace. Organizations will bring out their one or two black executives for all to see in the same way that some very kind white people I know will proudly share that they have black friends (or a black friend). However, the real question is not how many black friends or colleagues you have but the substance of the experience the black person is having in the friendship or the organization.

Diversity is about quantity. Inclusion is about quality. I learned this when I was executive director of the Boston Law Firm Group (now called the Boston Lawyers Group). As a consortium of large law firms in Boston, we initially aimed all our efforts at outreach and recruitment of attorneys of color, and we saw the numbers increase tremendously. Then we noticed them stagnate and even decline; all the people we invited in the front door were leaving out the back! We used to think that diversity was a goal in itself until we discovered that unless the environment, the friendship, the neighborhood, and the workplace are inviting, fair, and respectful, diversity is not going to thrive.

It's not that black people are helpless. It's not that we don't have our own dance steps to learn as well. However, I see us coming to a party where center stage is occupied and controlled by white leaders, managers, teachers, and politicians. So, even when we work hard to put our faith in meritocracy, learn the rules, master the norms, and sometimes adopt different ways of dancing outside of our comfort zone to better connect with white people who are uneasy with us, we still encounter barriers to genuine inclusion. What do they say? "It takes two to tango"? In the workplace, we eliminated legal barriers to racial discrimination, which was a crucial step, but it is not enough. We removed roadblocks, but we did not build bridges of true understanding. A similar situation occurred with fair housing laws—they allowed black people to move in, but then white people moved out.⁷ So, many black and white people have never had a real opportunity to get to know each other as individuals, to live and play next to each other. We also neglected the tough conversations needed to reconcile after so many years of racial bigotry and to process what we learned and needed to unlearn.

In my own social circles, I see how hard it is for white people to fully understand how much distance black people travel to create connection and how important they are, as white people, to bridging the gap that remains. I had girlfriends in a book club graciously open their homes to me, but refused to show up at my house the night I hosted because they were afraid to come to my mostly black and working class neighborhood. I just waited in my lovely home with wine, cheese, and crackers, and they never showed. When I moved to an affluent, predominately white neighborhood, white parents just assumed that my child was from the Boston voluntary busing program (METCO) where children of color from Boston are bused to predominately white schools to better integrate them. I have watched them kindly invite METCO kids to sleepovers at their beautiful homes in our tree-lined community but refuse to allow their boys to go to play football in the predominately black and brown Boston city neighborhoods where these same METCO students live.

Most of the white people in my community and the workplaces where I consult are well intentioned, but they continue to be

ineffective partners in the dance of inclusion. Some of them feel guilty and ashamed about the past and present predicament of black people, and they try too hard to be “nice” to black people, or they don’t know when and if they should confront black people about a problem or issue. What I have noticed is that trying to be nice often stands in the way of creating real inclusion. It prevents action or creates a situation where black people are ignored or coddled, rather than engaged and challenged.

Without knowing it, a nice white supervisor or teacher is setting some black employee or student up for failure because she can’t bring herself to deliver the critical feedback the black employee or student needs to improve. This niceness is also typified by white people who hire black folks who are wholly unqualified for the job. It is a misguided, sentimental attempt to “help” the black person and to support the organization’s “diversity” goals. It may seem counterintuitive, but this kind of behavior is based on an assumption that black people are inferior. When you don’t hold people to standards of excellence, deep down you are indicating that you don’t think you can find talented black people to meet your standards. The goal of diversity should be to fully integrate and utilize talented black folks. However, the aim becomes hiring people for the color of their skin, rather than for what they can bring to the organization—which is the true value of diversity. I will talk more specifically about these tendencies and how they implicate unconscious bias in Chapter Eleven.

Even when I know white managers who explicitly view African Americans as their equals, I observe them avoiding investing in, mentoring, or building meaningful relationships with blacks. Sometimes, they tell me that they worry they will say the wrong thing or not be able to identify with their black colleagues and supervisees. They view encounters with black people as risky. They worry they will be accused of being a racist and/or sued. *They prefer to stay at a distance rather than make mistakes, when, in actuality, the distance itself is often a far more serious injury.*

On the other side of the coin are the white folks who require more from black people, not less. It is hard to observe hiring committees (comprised only of white people) pass over black candidates who are quite capable but who do not possess that look, fit, or veneer—the right unthreatening, polished, and “whitened” tone, diction, and appearance that some whites seem to require before they can see a black candidate’s competency or potential.

As we will see later in our discussion in Chapter Eleven on in-group favoritism, we are all guilty of being more attracted to and favorable toward people who are like us. So, some white supervisors, unbeknownst to them, are looking for themselves in a black candidate. It is as if they want the candidate to be black but act and even look like them. It reminds me of a cartoon where two men in suits are trying to decide which of the professionally

dressed women waiting outside the office door they will hire. One of the men asks the other, "Which one do you suppose is the alpha?" In other words, they are staring at women, but they are really looking for a man.

How many times have successful black people heard a white person say either cheerfully or in an absentminded fashion, "I don't think of you as black person." Gay folks and women hear the same type of comments: To a gay person, "When I look at you, I don't see a lesbian." Or to a woman, "You are more of a man than I am." Even when such a comment is meant as a compliment, embedded in it is a revealing negative stereotype. Most black people don't appreciate being considered the exception to their race; they want to be regarded as proof positive that blacks are as good as anyone else. Of course, other blacks prefer to be regarded only as individuals, not representatives of any group or confirmation of any stereotype, be it positive or negative.

Real change in the inclusion of black people in our institutions will not happen unless we are willing to reexamine our ideas about merit. There are so many obstacles for blacks to overcome that are not about what they bring as individuals in the way of talent but about who sees that talent and chooses to help direct and develop it. How does the culture of our organizations—the unspoken rules and norms—impact the newcomers? Who will help translate these hidden ways of operating for groups, like blacks, who have been traditionally excluded from these environments? One problem is the paucity of black role models available to black people to translate and demystify the culture and point out the pitfalls.

We fail to acknowledge that so many of the opportunities in a meritocracy are shaped by the comfort level that white decision makers have with people who are most like them and by the discomfort and lack of identity and predictability they have with those who are not like them. Black people often encounter negative stereotypes about their intellectual capacity, their work ethic, and their deportment. So whereas there are a few black individuals who have had great success in majority white institutions, this lack of comfort and identification and negative stereotyping on the part of some whites make it much harder for blacks as a group to thrive. They are less successful attracting mentors and sponsors who have the power to positively influence their careers. There are some black people who seem to clear certain of these hurdles only to discover as they move up the ladder that they are excluded from the most exciting, rewarding, and lucrative opportunities within the institution. They are not invited on the important committees, tapped for leadership roles, or chosen as the beneficiaries of business that is being handed out or handed down. This isn't because they are not qualified; it is because they are not preferred or are invisible to those who make these decisions.

Blacks also have to contend with the racism and sexism (for black women) from vendors, clients, judges, decision makers, and secretaries outside their workplace. I wish I could have a dollar for every black man who was refused entry to his own downtown office building by the weekend security guard or parking garage attendant; or for every black female associate in a law firm who has been asked politely by a visiting client for rubber bands or coffee because she is mistaken for a secretary; or for the black lawyer with briefcase in hand who has been yelled at by courtroom officers because he is sitting in the attorney area since, of course, he must be the defendant.

After all the resources spent and goodwill extended, many white people, in exasperation, ask me why we haven't gotten further in racial understanding or increasing the diversity in our workplaces and lives. Sometimes, they don't like my response. I tell them what I have come to believe. Not enough white people have done their work: the work of seeing the barriers to true meritocracy, the work of putting themselves in the shoes of black people to learn more about their experiences and perceptions, the work of understanding how being white has shaped their worldview and self-perceptions, and the work of gaining the skills of deciphering and managing cross-racial and cultural dynamics. That's a lot of work, but without it you cannot create fundamental change in your sphere of influence.

The real question isn't, "Why haven't we seen a change in diversity?" The actual questions are these: "Do we want real change?" "What does change mean?" "Why should we want to change?" Here's what I mean: I have been invited to many workplaces to conduct internal assessments of an organization's diversity strengths and weaknesses. Often, when I present the analysis of how the firm's culture, informal processes, and policies (usually its formal policies are great) undermine its diversity goals, the firm's response is, "You did an excellent job describing our culture, and we are upset to hear that some women, people of color, and LGBT individuals are having a difficult time here, but we couldn't possibly change that—it is the way we have always done things." In other words, the firm's leaders are not going to change the organization's culture or the way they do things because it has worked well for them so far. They tell me, "We are the best at what we do in our industry." I smile and conclude, "*So you are committed to diversity, and you want to be more diverse, but you don't want to change anything?*" Those in power assume that to welcome change would risk their success or, at least, what they have defined as success.

Endnotes

1. The National Association for Legal Professionals (NALP) found a decline in the number of minority lawyers between 2009 and 2010,

especially among associates. Among all employers listed in the 2010–2011 NALP Directory of Legal Employers, just 6.16% of partners were minorities. African Americans comprised only 1.7% of partners with variation by cities. Atlanta has the highest percentage of black partners, followed by Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and New Orleans. For a closer look at these statistics see NALP findings on women and minorities in law firms by race and ethnicity, accessed Apr. 15, 2011, http://www.nalp.org/jan2011wom_min#table1.

2. I should also take this time to say what I mean when I use the word “black.” For me “black” refers to those of African descent from the United States, Canada, England, the Caribbean, South America, wherever; the word covers the whole diaspora. “African American,” for me, is a narrower classification, a subset of the black group. African Americans are the descendents of African slaves who were brought to America. I am African American. I like being called “black,” but others might prefer African American, which is fine for me as well because I definitely identify with being American. African Americans or black people are also part of what I refer to as “people of color”—those of African, Asian, Latino or Hispanic, and Native American descent.

3. In a recently written book, Eugene Robinson, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America* (Doubleday 2010), he suggests that there is no one black community. Instead, there are four sub-communities: the Transcendent—those who are of the elite class, like Oprah Winfrey; the Mainstream middle class—the majority of black Americans; the Emergent—immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean; and the Abandoned—a large group of the underclass that is growing in the rural parts of the South and inner cities.

4. I use the word “white” to refer to people who have Eastern and Western European ancestry. More recently, the term “European American” has been used to denote “white.” Some people also use the word “caucasian.” Some whites prefer to be called by their country or origin, such as Irish American or Italian American.

5. *What Is Race?: Is Race for Real?*, http://www.pbs.org/race/001_WhatIsRace/001_00-home.htm and http://www.pbs.org/race/001_WhatIsRace/001_00-home.htm (last accessed Apr. 17, 2011).

6. The PBS series, *Race: The Power of Illusion*, http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm, gives a wonderfully comprehensive explanation regarding the theory of race, race as a social and political idea vs. a biological fact, and the power of race and racism on life outcomes. This is a three-part series that offers a discussion guide and background readings on genetics, history, and society.

7. Actually, in 1999 some studies argue the biggest contributing factor to neighborhoods transitioning to all black neighborhoods is

white avoidance—white people living in all white neighborhoods who, when they move, are not willing to live in integrated neighborhoods—rather than white flight—white people moving out of neighborhoods when black people move in. L. Quillan, *Migration and the Maintenance of Racial Segregation*, Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin Working Paper No 98-29.



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