

CHICAGO LAWYER®

WOMEN@WORK

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e rely on experts in every aspect of our lives, from the stylists who cut our hair to the mechanics who repair our cars to the doc-

tors who keep us healthy. That's why I turned to Michelle Silverthorn to weigh in on diversity and inclusion. As the founder and CEO of Chicago-based diversity consulting firm Inclusion Nation [Editor's note: And former Chicago Lawyer columnist], Michelle's expertise on gender inequality is unparalleled.

Women@Work: We have been talking about gender inequality for so long, yet the conversation continues. Why has progress been so slow?

Silverthorn: I point to two chief reasons. We often talk about gender as if it's a monolithic concept. Gender programs at companies often focus on women as wanting the same things, seeking the same benefits, needing the same approach. That's clearly not right. But in the hierarchy of gender equality, certain groups of women are catered to at the top, while others hover toward the bottom. Unfortunately, so much of our discussion on gender equality focuses on the needs of white straight women, often married with children, to the exclusion of everyone else whose needs and priorities might be very different. I want the focus to move away from gender inequality and toward gender equity. Women are not a monolithic group. It's time we stop treating them as such.

The second reason is because men need to step up. Women did not exclude themselves from the workplace or design workplaces where they are inhibited from succeeding. Men did and still do. We need men to serve as allies and sponsors to women, to partner with women to help them enter spaces where they have long been kept out. Taking down the mountain of gender inequality is a life-long job and it can't be done by only half of the population, particularly when the highest levels of leadership are still populated by the other half.

Women@Work: What are successful, forward-looking organizations doing to address gender inequality?

Silverthorn: Revising policies. Expanding equal work and client access. Clarifying competencies. Actively seeking women for executive roles and leadership committees. Many have also taken a hard look at gender bias and have implemented solutions to interrupt and end that bias. Checking job postings for gender-biased language, anonymizing the resume and interview process,



EXPERT ADVICE

A Q&A with Inclusion Nation's Michelle Silverthorn

By CAMILLE KHODADAD

using groups of interviewers who compare their discussions rather than one on one, minimizing subjectivity in the evaluation process, and crucially, measuring and using data to evaluate progress made.

Women@Work: What advice do you have for female lawyers struggling with these issues?

Silverthorn: Make your road map. In a perfect world, what does your career look like? Where do you see yourself at 40? At 50? At 60? At 70? Think as expansively as possible. Then let's plan how to get there. What skills and support do you need? What organization do you need to work in?

Next, focus on finding your sponsors. Not role models whom you admire. Not mentors who can help you find your feet. But sponsors (and in the legal profession, primarily men) who are in the positions of power that you want to get to, who already have the good work and access to clients, who want to invest in you because you can provide them with skills or knowledge or networks that contribute to their own success.

Stay resilient, stay hopeful and remember one of my favorite quotes from Danai Gurira: "Go where you are loved, and you will do your best work." In a perfect world, no one would spend their careers underappreciated, undervalued and excluded from success. Make your road map for that.

Women@Work: What are your top five suggestions for addressing gender inequality?

Silverthorn: Number 1: Set goals. What do you want to achieve in six months, one year, five years?

Number 2: Measure progress. You can't manage what you don't measure.

Number 3: Identify competencies. Determine what actually gets men and women professionals from one level to the next in your organization. Interview for that. Hire for that. Promote that. Reduce your reliance on subjectivity because that only increases your reliance on bias.

Number 4: Listen to women. Hear what all women say when they tell you what they need to succeed.

Number 5: Examine and end microaggressions. They do add up. Want to know where to start? Here's an easy one: stop relying on women to take notes in meetings. CL

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