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Some conversations just stick with you. Long after they are over, you find yourself turning various points and questions over in your mind. I recently experienced this following a

Chicago Lawyer magazine roundtable discussion about diversity and the law. At the time, I didn't know it would have such significant impact that I would be thinking about it now, weeks later.

The roundtable participants came from a variety of backgrounds. The group itself epitomized the subject matter — participants were black, white, Hispanic and Asian and women made up roughly half of the group.

We came together to discuss diversity and inclusion in the legal profession, but ended up focusing primarily on why the needle has moved so little. Why don't the statistics show more minorities and women in leadership positions in law firms, general counsel positions, the judiciary and law school faculty positions?

Most legal professionals say that diversity and inclusion are important goals of their organizations and recognize that diversity is not only a valuable initiative, but also good for business. And diverse organizations tend to outperform those that are homogeneous. (See my July 2016 column in *Chicago Lawyer*.) This raises the question: If diversity is an important goal and is good for business, why haven't we seen it occur more rapidly and to a greater extent?

While a number of opinions were shared during that discussion regarding this frustrating question, one insight was particularly interesting. One participant said that as a minority in a large legal organization, he does not think most people intentionally discriminate against others. Rather, he feels that most discrimination is unintentional, perhaps even unconscious.

He made the point that people tend to help and associate with those with whom they feel most comfortable and that most people are comfortable with people who are similar to them. This familiarity and comfort come from having been raised with similar backgrounds and social experiences. When you are outside of the majority, it can be hard to fit in with the group and thrive because there are fewer common points of interest.

The problem with unconsciously limiting ourselves to those with whom we feel comfortable is that it can limit who we recruit, hire, give choice assignments to, mentor or sponsor and promote



MOVING THE NEEDLE

A conversation on race, gender and diversity lingers

By CAMILLE KHODADAD

to leadership positions — all factors that will affect an organization's efforts to create a diverse and inclusive work environment.

This insight and perspective reminded me of an earlier column I wrote on implicit bias. (See my November 2016 column in *Chicago Lawyer*.) The theory behind implicit bias is that because we come from different backgrounds and experiences, we all have unconscious biases in favor of certain groups of people and we unintentionally make decisions based on these biases. As discussed in that column, one way to overcome implicit bias is to put yourself in other people's shoes so you can empathize with them and understand their points of view.

Using this perspective, picture this: You are the only person of your race, gender or any particular affiliation. The rest of the group is outside of your particular affiliation and mostly the same as each other. How do you feel? Do you understand that there are certain jokes, experiences and social activities to which you may not relate? Do you understand how someone outside of your particular affiliation may not make the effort necessary to mentor and promote you and how this would affect your professional development? Do you understand why you may never feel truly a

part of the organization?

With more thought and focus on this new perspective, what would you change? Would this affect:

- The schools from which you recruit?
- Interview questions?
- Hiring standards?
- To whom you give choice assignments?
- Who you promote?
- Standards for promotion?
- Your efforts to make minorities and women feel included?

While there is no magic bullet for attaining a more diverse and inclusive organization, it requires more than just making a commitment. Putting ourselves solidly in the shoes of others so we can think of concrete ways to effectuate change is one way to take a first step. Only by taking a first step can we move closer to achieving our diversity goals. CL

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