

Legal diversity program gives lawyers a ‘voice at the table’

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Last November, Lumen launched a new program designed to encourage its law firms to give greater opportunities to diverse attorneys. In the first of his three-part series, Vice President and Deputy General Counsel Ryan McManis shares the eye-opening impact of a judge's observation.



In the days immediately following the merger of Level 3 and CenturyLink, I vividly remember wondering why anybody would have trusted me with the role that I was given. I had just inherited a new team, a new set of cases and a job that I had asked for, but in reality, wasn't sure I was capable of doing. Yet, there I was: without a choice other than jumping in the deep end and swimming as hard as I could. Luckily, I'm built for buoyancy. In those first few months after the merger, I learned a lot about my team, about myself and about how all of us are capable of driving positive change if we become comfortable embracing the uncomfortable.

No situation brought this concept home for me more than the consumer litigation I inherited when the deal closed. It was entirely new to me. I didn't know the subject matter, I didn't know the witnesses, and I didn't know the lawyers. In short, as much as I often joke about being "the dumbest guy in the room," this time, I truly was "the dumbest guy in the room." I was

uncomfortable. I was nervous. I was on the verge of being scared. Or maybe I was scared. But in those early moments of this new journey, I realized that I had a great opportunity to prove myself as a lawyer, to prove myself as a leader, to put my own stamp on my team, and to hopefully make things a little better. Looking back, I didn't know what that meant at the time, but I knew this new platform – which would ultimately become the Lumen of today – presented a tremendous opportunity to create change.

I recall watching a hearing in federal court that commenced this set of cases. The MDL (or grouping of cases) encompassed what at the time seemed immense – 19 class actions covering 37 states, 17 million current and former customers, and alleged damages of \$12 billion dollars; a securities class action alleging over \$1 billion dollars in damages; and a host of derivative lawsuits demanding that the company change the way it did business. It kicked off in a courtroom full of lawyers whom I didn't hire, whom I didn't know, and who were arguing about a case that was bigger than anything I had ever managed.

Following the arguments on that first day of a case that would end up lasting years, the judge narrowed his focus to a common – but rarely mentioned – occurrence in courtrooms across the country: that the day was dominated by white males.

In his remarks, the judge highlighted that almost every one of the 20 or so lawyers in the room was white and most were men. He made it very clear that he valued diversity in his courtroom, that he valued diversity in the profession, and that he wanted everyone to understand his expectations for diversity on the legal teams standing in front of him.

In that moment, the judge's words sent a powerful message about the value of action over words. The candor of his remarks was uncomfortable for everyone to hear, but there was no question that the next time this group appeared before him, it would not be the same. And it wasn't. And it hasn't been since. That message is what helped bring my team together, what helped me embrace the uncomfortable, and what ultimately became the basis for the diversity initiative that my team created and kicked off late last year.

In the next part of this series, McManis demonstrates the power of conversation to drive change.

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