

## Diversity and Inclusion Needs Assessments by Vernā Myers

If you thought you had heart disease, would you walk into a hospital and tell them which artery needed work? Probably not. Yet when it comes to diversity, many firms seem determined to skip the crucial step of professional diagnosis – the process known as a Diversity and Inclusion Needs Assessment.

The truth is that no organization can create a more diverse and inclusive internal environment without a clear understanding of its specific culture. Given the sensitivity of the subject, this diagnosis is best done by an outside consultant who can assure participants of confidentiality. To make sure the findings are relevant, it's also vital that your consultant be well-versed in the distinctive culture of law firms.

The assessment begins with focus groups and one-on-one interviews with people inside and outside the firm. Outsiders may include firm alumni, those who have declined offers, clients, and law school personnel. Through such a Diversity and Inclusion Needs Assessment (or cultural audit), the consultant gathers participants' experiences, perspectives, concerns and suggestions regarding diversity and inclusion. A good assessment also pinpoints the strengths of the overall culture and its diversity successes. Other key tools are anonymous surveys and a review of firm statistics.

While most firms now understand that an Assessment represents the “best practice,” many still resist it, often out of concerns about liability. Others feel that they already know what's wrong with their culture. Firms like these tend to resort to “cheese-cube” diversity – hoping that somehow a few sporadic wine and cheese receptions with speakers or students, or a one-time two-hour training of all their attorneys can magically create an inclusive culture. (Like the heart patient taking one five-mile walk and heading back to the couch.) In a few years, when nothing has changed, such firms inevitably get frustrated and conclude that progress on diversity is impossible.

From more than a decade of experience, I can report that firms are routinely amazed by and grateful for how much they learn from their assessments. To start with, because we are outsiders, individuals are much more candid with us. The assessment also clarifies the firm's most pressing issues and provides a clear rationale for a strategic action plan -- the next important step in long-term cultural change. The assessment also provides a base line for measuring ongoing diversity efforts.

Finally, the very process of asking people for their perspectives and posing questions that they may not have considered starts the process of buy-in and education. By taking the courageous step of identifying the underlying causes of the problem, a firm is well positioned to work hard with people throughout the organization to create what it says it believes in – an equal-opportunity meritocracy.