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“Diversity in a Downturn: Can we afford to continue to support diversity and inclusion in this economy? Can we afford not to?”

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Strange, isn't it. It does not seem that long ago when organizations, first corporations and more recently law firms, were asking themselves if they could afford an addition to overhead to do “diversity?” Or, if they could afford an additional non-revenue generating headcount to work on “diversity?” Or, just how many overhead, non-revenue generating headcounts could be devoted to “diversity?”

Well, the answer generally was “yes.” Organizations could afford a headcount addition and in many cases, organizations built multi-person diversity teams. Law firms may have been relatively late to adopt this model, but when they did, they did so with visible commitment. So committed—for a myriad of reasons, including a client-centric “business case,” that many major law firms now have dedicated resources to diversity and inclusion. I was one of the first to be hired as a Partner and Chief Diversity Officer, with full-time responsibility for diversity and inclusion strategy.

The responsibility of a law firm diversity professional ranges from leading and/or supporting firm-wide recruitment strategies and training efforts, to working with practice group leaders on professional development issues.

That was yesterday—metaphorically speaking—when the economy was growing, and organizations were competitively focused on attracting and retaining top talent. Seems like a lifetime ago, but it was really only a few years ago.

Today, many of our clients are focused on maintaining their businesses—and, if successful there, they are focused on doing more with less. We are in a period of “no frills;” doing the necessary with much less “nice.” Companies are tightly managing their budgets and laying off personnel in record numbers in an attempt to remain viable, if not profitable.

Professional services firms, like law firms, are dependent on financially healthy clients (i.e., organizations that can pay their bills) and we must in turn follow our clients' lead of austerity. Law firms simply cannot appear to be out of step with our clients—this is generally true, and even more so in this economic environment. If our clients are managing budgets tightly—that directly impacts us and we must do likewise.

But can we “afford” to keep our diversity and inclusion strategy? The answer may lie in the basis for the development of the strategy in the first place. Why is this consideration important?

In February 2009, the Texas Bar Journal published my article, “Developing Diversity and Inclusion as Core Values.” In it, I advance the position that diversity and inclusion ought to be a long-term business strategy. Indeed, at Andrews Kurth, diversity and inclusion are core values. I believe that the ability of the work of diversity and inclusion to survive the current economic downturn is directly related to the degree to which diversity and inclusion strategy is aligned with a firm's business strategy.

If the compelling motivation for doing any diversity and inclusion work at all is akin to “doing the right thing,” it will be a challenge to sustain even an ancillary “right thing” in a difficult economy. However, if the organization was strategic, and carefully articulated how diversity and inclusion related to the firm's overall business plan, retaining the strategy becomes much easier.

In fact, executing a well-integrated diversity and inclusion strategy can become essential to an organization's ability not only to survive these economic times, but to emerge as competitive as ever. That's the goal, at least, from the organization's perspective.

From the employees' perspective, you may be asking if there is anything that we can do to demonstrate our support for our organization AND for diversity and inclusion strategy? The answer, of course, depends on the organization/employer, but here are a few suggestions:

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1. What is generally expected of individual employees to support the firm's business strategy? If the firm continues its support of community-based organizations, for example, is there an opportunity for individual employees to volunteer time, money, or talent?
2. Does your firm advance a community of respect, as advocated by the Anti-Defamation League and certainly by our workplace employment laws? If so, are you conducting yourself, with co-workers, clients, and others, in accordance with workplace conduct expectations?
3. Does your firm value the diversity of perspectives such that seeking the input of others is encouraged? If so, individual employees can appropriately seek to include others in decision-making to maximize the quality of the decision.

Significantly, these suggestions require little, if any, out-of-pocket costs, yet go a long way in demonstrating the importance of maintaining a commitment to diversity and inclusion. Without ways to continue such a commitment, organizations not only risk losing gains made in vibrant economic times, but they may have difficulty regaining credibility to start the momentum to move forward again.

It is at this point that the lack of attention to diversity and inclusion strategy threatens the ability to retain top talent and maybe even clients—considerations that most organizations cannot afford to ignore.