

# The Path to Diversity: A View From the Road

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*by Kellie L. Howard-Goudy*

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*Collins Einhorn Farrell PC*  
4000 Town Center, 9th Floor, Southfield, MI 48075  
(248) 355-4141 • [www.ceflawyers.com](http://www.ceflawyers.com)

**H**ow do we avoid paying lip service to diversity as a concept? The question might be better phrased as how does a majority law firm from Oakland County attract the type of diverse talent it needs to meet its own goals of diversifying its work force, as well as its clients' goals of doing business with law firms that more accurately reflect the world in which we live? The answers we provide in this article are lessons from the road. We have not yet arrived at our destination, but after years of trial and error we have learned from the journey.

Law firms should seek to develop a culture in which there is an authentic recognition and appreciation of diversity as more than just a popular catchphrase. Diversity is more than photographs that will look good on firm brochures. Indeed, there are significant segments of the population that may not be readily apparent in a snapshot. These segments include members of the LGBTQ community, veterans, individuals with physical disabilities and others who may not "look" diverse. By appreciating the need to develop a widely varying cast of professionals, firms can begin to move away from recognizing diversity on a surface level without appreciating the real benefits of diversity.

A diverse work force should be sought not because it looks good but because it thinks differently. We are litigators; that is not unique in Oakland County. Distinguishing ourselves from other similarly situated firms means differentiating ourselves. Something that all law firms need to consider is that one of the most effective paths to differentiation is through diversity. The firm that has lawyers from the greatest number of backgrounds, approaching problems at varying angles and offering clients solutions on every level, has the best chance to differentiate their practice from other firms. In fact, didn't that sound like the tagline off a firm website? If it is to be more than a tagline, however, law firm management has to be able to discern that individuals from different backgrounds are more likely to think differently from one another. Bringing those individuals together for the power of diversity in business collaboration is how you move your firm from lip service to developing a culture that will attract and retain diversity. But first, there must be recognition and appreciation for what diversity really is and how it will benefit your practice.

Majority firms that want to diversify must also be somewhat fearless and definitely relentless. When we made the decision to be proactive about diversity here at Collins Einhorn, in terms of race and ethnicity the firm was entirely a majority firm. Moreover, the applicant pool was composed of almost exclusively majority candidates. But here is where the fearless part becomes critical. We had to first admit that blaming the applicant pool might not be the best strategy available to us. Then, a collection of older-than-millennial majority attorneys had to venture outside their comfort zone and get advice.

We reached out to our friends and colleagues who were members of minority law firms, and the minority bar associations. We asked direct questions about what we could do to be an attractive landing spot for highly qualified applicants of diverse backgrounds. What we learned in those

interactions was that in order to make ourselves a compelling home for a diverse work force, we had to first interact more with diverse communities. The increased community involvement had a dual purpose. We learned things we didn't know and also made it publicly known that this firm is actively interested in and committed to diversity.

So, a firm of almost entirely majority attorneys delved into areas where others sincerely (and sometimes out loud) wondered, "What are they doing here?" We began and continue attending the DRI's diversity conference in Chicago on an annual basis. We continued and increased our outreach to the minority bar associations here in metropolitan Detroit. We sponsor events, attend events and involve ourselves in community diversity efforts. One of our managing partners, Neil MacCallum, joined and eventually chaired the Oakland County Bar Association's Diversity Committee, perhaps an unlikely spot for a Scotsman from a farm in the thumb. But it is demonstrative of just how committed we have been in our effort to send a message to the community that diversity is genuinely valued here.

Have we met our goals yet? After years of efforts, the answer is no. Have we made progress? We believe so. From our staff through our partnership ranks, we have increased the representation of individuals from nearly every walk of life. We are now at the point where the "relentless" part has become the issue. We don't always feel we have made the progress that reflects our commitment. The firm has made credible and consistent efforts – we now have an equal number of men and women at the partnership level but still only one ethnic minority partner. While it can feel like high-effort/low-outcome at times, in reality it took 45 years to become the firm that we are today. A few more years to become the firm we can be is a worthwhile investment. We are at the point now that we have enough internal diversity and connections with external diverse communities that we have begun to think of more innovative strategies. For example, in the coming year, we plan to launch new initiatives that focus on increasing the pipeline of talent and potential applicants.

The point is that diversifying is not easy. The path is not always obvious. Firms that grasp the true value of diversity and seek it without fear and with an eye toward the long game are the ones that succeed over time.

*Kellie L. Howard-Goudy is a partner at Collins Einhorn Farrell PC. She is a part of the firm's professional liability defense and general and automotive liability defense practice groups. Kellie is a member of the Wolverine Bar Association, the National Bar Association, DRI and the Minority In-House Counsel Association. She also works internally with CEF to formulate, institute and promote diversity and inclusion initiatives.*

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