

The Inclusive Office: My New Year's diversity resolutions

By: Special to The Daily Record Heather Neu January 29, 2020



When I envisioned "The Inclusive Office" column, I thought I would produce data-laden articles about wide-ranging issues of diversity, especially those I thought the average attorney in Monroe County may have not spent much time considering. It turned out to be a lot more my white self discovering the centuries of work women, people of color, and every other minority group have done on these issues (though to be clear, all the data is there). Writing this column has been more difficult and personal than I anticipated. To that end, since it is January and resolutions are ubiquitous, I am committing myself to several diversity resolutions and encourage you to join me.

Pay closer attention.

I will seek out opportunities to educate myself. All that aforementioned centuries of work women, people of color, and every other minority group have been doing? It's there for everyone to see. So I commit to read one book per month by a woman or person of color and to follow community activists in these groups on social media.

Last September, Bossy Rochester hosted "A Panel Discussion and Workshop on Diversity and Inclusion," where I met several community advocates I now follow on social media. One such advocate is a person in a wheelchair. She recently posted an article about the importance of clearing snow from sidewalks in order to allow people with mobility issues the basic freedom of movement. This was eye-opening in and of itself, but her caption most affected me — she referred to winter as "prison season" because it was so difficult to get around because of the snow. This weekend, I found myself rapt and heartbroken by the Twitter trend "#UHateDisabledPeople." The everyday ableism people with disabilities face is vast and painful ("@itswalela: If you believe disabled people are "faking" our conditions because our disabilities don't present in a way you're accustomed to or because you think we are trying to 'scam' people or 'cheat' the system [#UHateDisabledPeople](#)"; "@A_Silent_Place: If you're refusing to

vaccinate because you're more afraid of your child being autistic (a 'link' which has no scientific evidence) than dead [#UHateDisabledPeople](#)"). Had I not friended this one person on Facebook, I would not have been exposed to any of this.

Earlier this month, I attended the National Conference of Women's Bar Associations' "The Importance of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in Women's Bar Organizations." One presenter was a black woman, who commented that panels, even those specifically about diversity that include more speakers than just white men, usually omit black women. I have written about this before, but it continues to be a pervasive problem with an easy solution — pay attention to who comprises your panel for presentations, CLEs, etc. In 2020, there is virtually no reason why a panel omits persons of color or is made entirely of white cisgender men.

Act.

Paying closer attention is useless if I don't act on my new knowledge. If paying attention gives me the "so what," a commitment to act gives me the "now what."

Because of my new awareness of accessibility, I am now diligent about clearing my own sidewalk and even my neighbors'. I try to take stock of every building I walk into for accessibility options and obstacles. I hope when I observe any such barriers that I am confident enough to use my agency and privilege to speak to management about them.

Learning more about the great scope of ableism has also made me confront my own ableist language. I have previously modified my language to stop (inaccurately) describing unbelievable or ridiculous things as "crazy" or "insane," but that's a fraction of our quotidian ableist language. My mom worked with people with intellectual disabilities her entire career, so the "R" word was banned, and she corrected people every time she heard that word. I adopted her approach and hope to continue to do so with many more hurtful words.

If you're attending an event where there is a homogenous group of presenters, say something — to the organizers, but also to the rest of the audience; it is possible no one else in the room noticed the lack of inclusion and if they had, they'll likely appreciate someone pointing it out. If you're asked to be on such a homogenous panel, politely demur and find an alternate for yourself who has a different culture, world view, or lived experience than you. If you don't realize the panel is homogenous until you're at the event, call it out yourself and be willing to defer to people in the audience who could speak to their culture, world view, or lived experience.

Become comfortable being uncomfortable.

Anyone who knows me may be surprised to hear this is the one with which I struggle most. I suffer from anxiety (here I will note my full-throated recommendation for the

Tree of Hope Counseling, which offers four free counseling sessions for MCBA members. Call 585-353-1541 to schedule your appointment. Also, save that number in your phone to share). So raising my voice for diversity has been a constant battle of making myself uncomfortable. I am a white, cis woman. I am well-educated and grew up financially comfortable, with both parents, in an almost entirely homogenous town. My lived experiences are markedly different from the people we mean, intentionally or not, when we talk about diversity. None of the things I just talked about doing under "act" are easy for me. But there are too many people for whom "diversity" issues are the realities of their daily lives. So I hereby resolve to pay attention and to act, regardless of my comfort.

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