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Team Building

By Melanie Padgett Powers

WHEN OMAR FRANCO was hired by Becker & Poliakoff to create and lead a Washington, D.C., office for the firm's lobbying practice in 2011, he knew he wanted a collaborative team that could bring a variety of backgrounds and opinions. But he also relied on his longtime Florida ties to seek out the best leaders he knew with Capitol Hill experience.

Embracing a mix of minority leadership engenders diversity of thought and better client strategies.



Franco, who is Cuban-American, first hired Clarence Williams, who is African-American. The two had become respected colleagues when they were chiefs of staff for Florida state legislators. Both later worked for Florida congressmen on Capitol Hill. Next came Amanda Wood, a white woman, who also started out in Florida before becoming a legislative director on Capitol Hill. Last summer, the group added John Ariale, a white man, who served as a chief of staff for a Florida congressman.

Florida and Capitol Hill connect the team, but their race, ethnicity and gender differences offer a variety of viewpoints to their clients, which include businesses, trade and professional associations, local governments and advocacy groups. Their diverse makeup engenders

a diversity of thought, which leads to innovative and successful client solutions.

It's important to "surround yourself with quality individuals who bring different perspectives to the table," Ariale said. He appreciates being able to brainstorm with the other three lobbyists and reach a point of view he might not have otherwise considered, which can lead to more creative approaches for his clients.

"I've never worked in such a collaborative place in my life," Wood said. "This is a team in the truest sense of the word."

Advantages of True Diversity

Firms that embrace diversity can't just hire people from different ethnicities, races and backgrounds and stop there, says attorney Verná Myers, of the Verná Myers Consulting Group, which helps law firms and companies create and sustain inclusive environments where traditionally underrepresented groups can thrive.

Firms successful at diversity foster a culture that allows employees to speak up—and be heard—borrowing from their culture and life perspectives when brainstorming and problem-solving, says Myers, author of *Moving Diversity Forward: How to Go from Well-Meaning to Well-Doing*.

Firms with true diversity “understand that [employees’] views are going to be shaped by who they are and where they come from,” she said. Firms that fail at this might hire a diverse staff but expect them to conform to the values and thinking of those already there. New York University law professor Kenji Yoshino introduces the idea of “covering,” denying equal opportunity to people who refuse to downplay their differences. Addressing this “coerced conformity” is a hidden threat to civil rights, Yoshino said.

Firms and practice groups like Becker & Poliakoff that foster diverse perspectives can elevate their client work in numerous ways, Myers said.

“Diversity gives you a better ability to predict your client needs and what might happen next,” Myers said. “Diverse groups do a better job of being creative and innovative around a problem. Their different worldviews and experiences influence their approach to a problem, and their thinking expands and sharpens solutions.”

A 2014 study showed that Wall Street traders who were on more ethnically diverse teams priced stocks more accurately than more homogenous teams. Diversity creates friction and prevents groupthink, the researchers said.

Diverse teams have broader networks, which, in turn, expand their resources. Becker & Poliakoff lobbyists have encouraged clients to reach out to groups they might not have previously considered. For example, Franco recommended a corporate client consider the Hispanic community as a useful ally on an issue the company was lobbying on.

Challenges When Building Diversity

A diverse team can have its own unique challenges, however. Listening to—and sometimes debating—a variety of ideas can take more time than if everyone felt the same way. “Sometimes the process is not as fluid,” Myers said. “You have to take more time airing and discussing different viewpoints.”

Debate among a heterogeneous team requires better communication skills than for a team that leans toward

groupthink. People often need to learn to be quiet and listen in a way they might not have done before. And even if they are from a traditionally underrepresented group, they may have their own biases against other groups.

As a Hispanic man, Franco has evoked surprise after some people learn he is Republican. But then they learn he’s Cuban-American, and the stereotyping continues: “Oh, of course; you’re Cuban. That explains it. That’s not really Hispanic.” Williams, on the other hand, is always assumed to support Democratic issues, so people were often shocked when he and his then-boss Congressman Kendrick Meek were pushing for an infrastructure tax credit bill, a more traditional Republican issue.

When people underestimate a person because of stereotypes, Williams says it can be used to that person’s advantage. “That gives you two steps on them before you ever start talking. You can tell when you walk into a room and there’s an assumption about how you’re going to speak or what you’re going to say. ... They’ve got this whole range of ideas about who I am when I sat down, and it’s really not my job to diffuse any of that. My job is to do my job, and everything else will take care of itself.”

Myers says as we diversify our networks, “our biases and stereotypes get challenged. We don’t even know what [biases] we have until we have a chance to be with people different from us. You rarely confront your assumptions and biases if you’re just hanging out with yourself.” This process will likely make people uncomfortable at times, “but if the outcome is a better solution and expanded client base or a win, it’s worth it,” she said.

Williams believes it’s important for people to discover their commonalities that allow them to connect with each other, whether with co-workers, clients or organizations. “Find that core piece that is the glue between any group of folks you talk to that you can focus in on,” Williams says, “and that becomes the thing that moves the whole group forward.”

The Becker & Poliakoff lobbying team has built a culture that recognizes, nourishes and embraces diversity. This brings about a relaxation and a freedom for the lobbyists to speak their minds, which allows them to focus on their top priority: their clients.

The glue that brings the team together, Williams says, is a passion “about what we do and who we represent and why we do this. ... We love what we do.” ■

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