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BUSINESS TRIAL LAWYERS

Leveraging Diversity: Lessons from War and Diplomacy

Orange County's businesses operate in a diverse environment as part of a global market. This often means working with employees and partners from different cultures and backgrounds. Business leaders must develop a cross-cultural advantage to stay competitive. Corporate counsel also have an ethical obligation as members of the California Bar to advance diversity and eliminate bias in the legal profession.

Nearly a decade as a diplomat with the U.S. State Department showed me that diversity isn't a challenge to be managed, but an asset to be leveraged. From Baghdad to Budapest, working with both civilian and military colleagues taught me that building and participating in diverse teams developed transferrable skills like flexibility and the ability to manage uncertainty.

Your team will make better decisions and respond more effectively to change and challenges if it comprises people with different experiences and different perspectives, *who have learned to come together and work as a team*. It's not enough to take a bunch of people who don't look like each other, or who grew up in different places, throw them together, and hope they become a cohesive unit. You have to build trust, create a culture of respect, and identify a core mission that can unite a team.

Build Trust

Trying to see things from the other person's perspective goes a long way in building trust. In the State Department, we spent up to a year preparing for a foreign assignment, including learning the local language, customs, and culture. And when we arrived "in country," we traveled outside the major cities to meet people we wouldn't normally interact with as part of our diplomatic work. Doing so reaped enormous dividends. My foreign counterparts appreciated my effort to learn not just about their history, language, and culture, but about how things looked from their perspective. The effort showed I was serious about building a relationship and considering their viewpoints, which made it easier for us to solve shared problems. And it made it easier when I needed to ask our friends and allies for help – whether that was in fighting Ebola or combating the Islamic State.

The same bridge building worked in reverse. Our strongest advocates in many foreign governments were officials who had spent a significant amount of time in the United States. The more we understood about each other's backgrounds, the easier it was to establish trust and find common ground.

Business leaders don't have the luxury of taking months out of their schedule to learn a new language or immerse themselves in another culture, but the same lessons apply whether you are entering a new foreign market, plugging into an international supply chain, or building cross-cultural teams. Succeeding in these tasks requires the same understanding, openness to new experiences, and willingness to listen.

Create a Culture of Respect

A perceived lack of respect will prevent trust from being built and can erode any existing trust quickly. As diplomats, we learned to not take offense where none was intended and to avoid accidentally giving offense. The flexibility demanded of us in working in cultures with different norms made us more adaptable to challenging circumstances. Making respect a core value also made our teams stronger.

A common experience for diplomats who don't have "American sounding" names was to be greeted with disbelief when introducing ourselves. On more than one occasion, I was asked by someone coming in for an appointment if they could speak to a *real* American. As a diplomat, I understood these to be opportunities to demonstrate how American identity transcends race, religion, or national origin.

But not all potentially offensive comments came from the well-meaning, but unaware. At a dinner with top defense officials, a counterpart from another Western country began telling us all about how the West needed to unite to

keep out Middle Eastern immigrants, who couldn't assimilate to Western society, and who were violent and superstitious. I shared with him my own story as the daughter of Iranian exiles who completely assimilated into American society and was immediately supported by all of my military and civilian colleagues from the embassy.

Sharing my story was something I chose to do. But most people don't want to be ambassadors for their particular affinity group, and they shouldn't have to do so. Building a culture of respect within your organization and across your key partnerships will help ensure everyone is supported and will help your organization confront bias *as a team*. When team members respect each other, they become better allies and can foster a culture of respect through mutual expectations instead of dictates from above.

Unify Your Team Behind a Common Mission

Teams work better when they share a purpose. Building that purpose, however, can be more difficult when your team members come with differing expectations and assumptions. There can be a tendency to consider some team members' concerns or viewpoints as niche interests and deprioritize them. But when people don't feel connected to the purpose of their work, we rarely get the best out of them. And when we don't value their input, we lose out on opportunities to improve and innovate.

One of the things I admire most about the U.S. Armed Forces is their ability to unify people from every walk of life behind a common mission. The military calls this "One Team. One Fight." Getting everyone to work toward a common purpose requires looking beyond what makes us different, which we can do once we've built trust and respect. Once we all understand the shared goal that we are committed to, we can bring our diverse experiences and perspectives to accomplishing that goal.

Conclusion

I was fortunate to be able to bring these experiences back with me into the practice of law in Orange County, where I work with an incredibly talented, diverse team of attorneys to serve clients whose interests span the globe. In business and law, these lessons can help us move beyond simply managing diversity to building extraordinary, high achieving teams.

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