



Champions of Diversity

A Conversation with NAPABA's William "Bill" Simonitsch

The National Asian Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA) represents the interests of more than 40,000 Asian Pacific American attorneys around the country.



William "Bill" Simonitsch

It supports the professional development of Asian Pacific American attorneys and advocates for the Asian Pacific American community at large. NAPABA meets with legislators and the White House to discuss policy issues and to promote nominations of Asian Pacific Americans to positions in the federal judiciary and the executive branch. NAPABA has programming throughout the year, and

around the country, including its Annual National Convention, where NAPABA provides training and panel discussions on issues of concern for Asian Pacific American lawyers, including pipeline issues.

The DRI Diversity Committee's new chair of publications, Shelley Napolitano, sat down with Bill Simonitsch, the immediate past president of NAPABA and a partner at K&L Gates in Miami, to learn about his thoughts and some real solutions to issues of diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

What do you think is the best method or strategy to incorporate diversity within the legal profession?

First, everyone from CEOs, to executive committees, to managing partners must not only approve diversity initiatives, they must believe in the cause. Otherwise, trickle-down apathy will kill it. For example, firms and corporations throw around phrases like "Diversity is a core value" and "Diversity is in our DNA." But at the same time, management may continue to focus on the business case for diversity or the monetization of diversity. I've never heard anyone say that we need to establish the business case for other core values. Who needs a committee to establish the value of professionalism or integrity? It can't be in your corporate DNA if you do not innately recognize that diverse perspectives and a diverse talent pool lead to greater success. Second, companies that want diverse outside counsel must encourage and financially support the efforts of their in-house counsel to engage with diverse attorneys. It is asking a lot to expect in-house counsel to hire someone they don't know just because their names are on a diverse attorneys

list. The companies that understand this want their in-house counsel out in the world meeting diverse attorneys face to face, where true relationships of trust are formed. They send their in-house counsel to diverse bar conferences, for example, where they can meet diverse attorneys, hear them speak, and learn about their practices. That opens the pipeline for diverse outside counsel and future in-house recruits. Finally, law firms and companies must educate their people on the impact of implicit bias on the hiring, development, and promotion of diverse professionals, and they must consider whether their various procedures and evaluative methods should be modified to account for it.

What makes diversity and inclusion important to you in a personal way?

Not only am I Asian American, I'm a mixed race Asian American. So, I have experienced prejudice and feelings of exclusion from multiple angles. I have cousins that are part African American. I am the father of a mixed race daughter and son, and I am the godfather of a boy with special educational needs. I am proud of all of these people in my life, and I want to be sure that each one has access to all the opportunities life has to offer. You don't have to go to six degrees of separation to find people in your life that are diverse and can be affected by implicit or explicit bias. So, diversity and inclusion should be important to everyone in a personal way.

What is an ideal way to address any intra-office prejudices or exclusion between co-workers?

A business must deal with these issues before there is a problem. You must work toward creating diverse, inclusive teams from the beginning, without assuming that "we don't have those problems here." While you can't force organic relationships, you can facilitate the interaction of attorneys of different backgrounds, which allows them to get to know one another. Personal relationships defy and erode stereotypes; memos about acceptance do not.

Why is diversity in the work place essential to a company's success?

Diversity and inclusion are essential because they expand the talent pool and provide diverse perspectives. Just think about how much talent was brought into the workplace when it became more open to women. And there

are countless studies that show that diverse boards and workplaces are more effective at identifying and solving problems due to the variety of experiences shared. Certainly diversity and inclusion help companies and firms better understand the views of their own clients and customers, because those clients and customers are of different genders, races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. But let's not forget the importance of inclusion. Bringing diversity into a company is great, but if people don't feel incorporated and truly a part of the team, then they are not going to stay. Letting them through the door is just the first step; they also need a seat at the table. 