

Can NALSC Members Help Improve Race Relations in the Legal Profession?

We, as a country, are taking stock. We are taking stock of our health care system and its weaknesses. We will be taking stock, in just a few months, of our political future with the upcoming election. And, we are taking stock of the systemic racism that exists in this country.

We are in a time of upheaval, and across the country, race relations are being discussed. It is the moment for industry leaders, like us, to take an honest look at how our own organizations, organizations that we recruit for, and our membership in professional organizations such as NALSC, can advance diversity and inclusion in the legal profession. We have seven suggested steps you can take to make a positive impact.

1. Reach out with empathy

The concept of “weathering” has been garnering increased attention recently. Simply put, “weathering” is the ever-present level of stress that results from consistently experiencing either small or significant incidents of discrimination. Over a lifetime, “weathering” could explain the increased likelihood of health issues that are prevalent in diverse communities.

Call your colleagues, candidates, and clients of color and ask them how they are weathering the current race relations conversation and events. What positive changes do they see happening? Listening with genuine empathy goes a long way.

2. Tap into the resources already in the organization

Consider sponsoring a Diversity & Inclusion Initiative in a client organization or share sponsorship across several law firms or organizations. Possibly ask to sit in on a brainstorming session on how the D&I team or group can improve diversity in their firms or across firms. Keep the conversation moving forward focusing on solutions.

Ask if there are mentoring programs for lawyers or other professionals of color in which you may be able to participate as a mentor. You may have a wealth of knowledge to impart about navigating legal careers and what leadership attributes are highly sought.

3. Benchmark with in-house and firm leadership

We all know that two heads are better than one. Your search firm likely will not have tried certain approaches. So, ask leadership in the legal community what they are doing to improve their own organizations’ diversity awareness.

4. Reach out to bar organizations focused on a particular minority group

Most states throughout the country have diversity bar associations. The Asian Pacific American Lawyers Association, the National Bar Association (Black lawyers), the Hispanic Bar Association, and The National Muslim Lawyers Association are just a few.

You may consider sponsoring an event and/or volunteering to participate on a panel with a diversity bar association so that you can foster dialogue and learning. Positive diversity conversations will be the path to better understanding, knowledge, and synthesized growth.

5. Focus on diversity in hiring practices

Law firms, companies, and not-for profits likely have procedures in place when it comes to hiring lawyers. The current climate in our nation should be the catalyst that pushes you to review the hiring pro-

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cesses at the clients you recruit for and see how you can further their diversity initiatives.

6. Go beyond diversity and inclusion, and pledge to invest in the future

Systemic racism is not always obvious. Systemic racism manifests in unspoken norms and routines that delineate better or worse opportunities for employees based on skin color. In sum, we know that acknowledging the problem is the first step to solving it. Pledging to invest in the future by contributing to law school scholarships for students of color or law schools that promote and advocate for diversity may contribute to a more robust future pipeline.

7. Own it and think outside the box for solutions

D&I training can help, but awareness alone does not get you where you need to be. Rather than educating professionals on microaggression (indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group), look for training programs that provide the tools to respond to the behavior. Indeed, a two-hour training, or diversity lunch, helps but may not go far enough. Accountability and empowering us to uphold diversity principles is a solid first step.

And if you’re feeling courageous enough, host a Town Hall Meeting like Damien Atkins, General Counsel of Hershey Corporation: <https://www.law.com/2020/07/07/small-acts-of-courage-hershey-general-counsel-damien-atkins-on-driving-diversity/>. Being a leader of color may help, but you may also find a leader inside or outside your organization to partner with in running town hall conversations (where appropriate).

Conclusion

Our country is taking stock concerning race relations. Our current national dialogue surrounding systemic racism presents an opportunity for all of us to prospect for diverse and inclusive opportunities in our own organizations and professional affiliations, and with clients and candidates. To be sure, the issue will be challenging to discuss. Yet, as always, we can quietly and confidently facilitate the advancement of this worthwhile endeavor.