



Plunkett Cooney: A Matter of Trust

Improving diversity, equity and inclusion through meaningful conversations

A sage person once observed that the private practice of law is all about relationships. Most of us can attest to the fact that the best relationships, whether familial or professional, are built on trust. And, one could argue, without the ability to have meaningful conversations, it is virtually impossible to reach the critical stage of building trust in our relationships.

At Plunkett Cooney, advancing the firm's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) efforts is critically dependent upon meaningful conversations. Some start with the candidate interview process. Others take place after new hires settle into their offices to take on assignments and collaborate with colleagues. Yet others between mentors and protégés center around crucial topics like career path and reaching coveted shareholder status.

At the center of these conversations and efforts to build a more diverse and inclusive Plunkett Cooney is Director of Diversity & Inclusion Laurel F. McGiffert. A former trial attorney with 40 years of expertise defending municipal, employment and medical litigation, Laurel knows firsthand the power of meaningful conversations as a tool for creating trust. She applies this same approach to help create support for and energy behind her firm's DE&I efforts.

"I've always had a natural curiosity about people, so I find it easy to ask questions and share information with others," said McGiffert, who was appointed by the firm's President & CEO Thomas P. Vincent as Plunkett Cooney's first D&I Director. "My years spent defending clients has shown me that taking the time to understand another person's perspective and to appreciate their concerns through conversation is crucial for building a lasting trust."

Today, McGiffert, who is a trained mediator, finds herself inviting others to use the power of conversation to deepen relationships whether between supervisors and staff, executive team members and attorneys, and even among peers. When people take the time to truly talk to one another, she said, it is amazing how much the environment changes for the better, particularly from an inclusion standpoint.

"We are focused on retaining the outstanding individuals we spend so much time recruiting. Once you find qualified candidates, it's imperative that you shift to retention mode, and that involves everyone in the relationship pipeline," McGiffert explained. "Our inclusion efforts rely on building trust, understanding each individual and leveraging his or her strengths. You can only do that by engaging and staying connected with people over time."

Plunkett Cooney's internal DE&I conversation began nearly 20



Laurel F. McGiffert
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years ago when the firm's Board of Directors created a committee dedicated to addressing DE&I as moral and business imperatives. Careful planning by the committee and the firm's executive team resulted in dramatic increases in the number of female attorneys employed by the firm, more diverse pools of new hire candidates, more diverse attorneys in leadership roles, a robust lineup of DE&I enrichment programs and greater outreach to the communities where the firm maintains its 10 offices.

At Plunkett Cooney, employees can explore a variety of DE&I programs, and the firm's newsletter provides educational and awareness articles and other resources designed to keep the DE&I conversation going. Last summer, following the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, Plunkett Cooney joined its contemporary law firms in metro Detroit to sign a public statement pledging solidarity to continue the fight against structural racism and to champion civil rights for all.

"We are going through a lot as a nation, and I'm proud of the stand our firm has taken in this conversation about equality, equity and the civil rights all Americans should enjoy under the Constitution," McGiffert said. "We engaged our employees. We listened, and we created programming that walked toward this difficult conversation with sessions about policing in America and what each of us can do to be more effective stewards of fairness and decency toward one another."

The conversation continues. **S**