

FRIDAY, JULY 10, 2020

Physician heal thyself

By Patricia Gillette

I am so proud of the many lawyers who have come forward to offer assistance to demonstrators and victims of police violence in the context of recent events. We have the ability to provide them with legal assistance and guidance. We can also counsel those in positions of power — who are finally awakening to the crisis created by institutionalized racism in our country — by helping them formulate meaningful structural change and develop transformational policies.

But as we rush to provide services as well as advice on how to deal with systemic issues of race discrimination, let's remember the old adage that people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. The legal industry is no model of equality. Despite the increase in the number of minorities and women graduating from law school, we continue to see little difference in the make up of our industry leaders — chairs of firms,

practice group leaders, rain-makers and general counsel. We tolerate statistics year after year that show minimal increases in the number of minorities and women in our ranks. We include firms on the “best of the best” lists with little regard for any meaningful progress for minorities and women. We pat ourselves on the back for providing programs and training that may have minimal impact on actually moving the diversity dial in our firms.

It's time to stop and take stock of our own house. Just as we race to correct the injustices that are being revealed in our communities, we should also race to correct the injustices that are present in our backyards. We should feel the same urgency and the same commitment to make meaningful and sustainable changes in our organizations to ensure that minorities and women are, in fact, being treated fairly. That means changes in all aspects of our operations, including the way we choose leaders of our firms, the factors we

use to set compensation and assess contributions to the firm, how we assess and evaluate our lawyers at all levels, how we recruit and integrate new lawyers into our firms, and how we assign work, provide client development opportunities, and dole out lead counsel roles in litigation and corporate deals.

We lawyers like to think of ourselves as fair minded, rule of law proponents, but in fact, we have long ignored the inequalities that have plagued our ranks. So let's take a lesson from the people who are lining the streets in protest of systemic and institutionalized inequality. No more talk. No more wishing and hoping for change. We need concrete plans to examine and break through the institutional and systemic roadblocks that have prevented us from bringing equity and equality to our industry.

Lawyers, it is time for us to heal ourselves. ■

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Gillette had many years of experience as a top rated trial lawyer and mediator. When she was in practice, Ms. Gillette focused on all aspects of employment law, including litigation of wrongful discharge and discrimination class actions and individual/multi-plaintiff cases in both state and federal court, representation of employers before administrative agencies, and counseling and training employers on preventive personnel practices. Ms. Gillette is a nationally recognized speaker on issues of diversity and inclusion. For more information, visit her website at www.patriciagillette.com.

