

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO  
MUSLIM AMERICAN INCLUSION

THE ROI  
OF D&I

IS SYSTEMIC UNCONSCIOUS BIAS  
HOLDING YOUR COMPANY BACK?

# INCLUSION

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*Creating  
Globally  
Inclusive &  
Culturally  
Competent  
Workplaces*



AKIN GUMP  
STRAUSS  
HAUER &  
FELD LLP

Powering  
the Future:  
Diversity,  
Collaboration,  
and Innovation

MICHELE C.  
MEYER-SHIPPI, ESQ.





## Michele C. Meyer-Shipp, Esq. Chief Diversity & Inclusion Officer, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP

**F**ew chief diversity officers come to the position with a law degree. For Michele Meyer-Shipp, her long and distinguished track record as an employment attorney provided the ideal background for her transition to diversity and inclusion.

Meyer-Shipp joined Akin Gump this past October as the firm's first chief diversity and inclusion officer. In her new position, she has principal responsibility for all diversity programs and initiatives across the firm.

Meyer-Shipp came to Akin Gump from Prudential Financial Inc., where she was vice president and counsel in the company's Employment and Labor Law Group before moving to the office of diversity and inclusion. Previously, she served as general counsel of the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor and as employment counsel at Merrill Lynch and head of its diversity and inclusion efforts in the Global Wealth Management business.

Meyer-Shipp received her law degree from Seton Hall University School of Law. She has served on the boards of GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network), the National Organization on Disability, the Women Presidents' Organization, and the American Conference on Diversity. She is an active member of several professional associations.

In 2015, Meyer-Shipp was named a Diverse Attorney of the Year by the *New Jersey Law Journal*. That same year, she received the Oliver Randolph Award from the Garden State Bar Association and the WILL (Women's Initiative and Leaders in Law) Platinum Award for the Corporate Sector from the New Jersey Women Lawyers Association. She has made the *Black Enterprise* list of Top Executives in Corporate Diversity three times, and was named one of the Most Powerful and Influential Women of the Tri-State Area by the Tri-State Diversity Council. In 2017, she received the Winds of Change Award in the individual category from the Forum on Workplace Inclusion, was recognized by Seton Hall Law School for her work in advancing diversity in the New Jersey legal community, and was named to the Top 100 Under 50 Emerging & Executive Leaders by *Diversity MBA*. Meyer-Shipp enjoys spending her free time with her husband and their three sons.

**INCLUSION:** Given the change of emphasis in our current federal administration, in coming years will it be more incumbent on organizations to be at the vanguard leading the push for inclusion?

**Michele C. Meyer-Shipp:** Given recent changes to the federal administration and its areas of focus, it is more

important than ever that US corporations be bold and clear in their commitment to diversity and inclusion. We need their voices to stand strong and firm on the importance of D&I in our communities and our workforce. For some organizations, this will be an easy challenge, as they are already actively driving this effort. For other organizations where D&I has not been a priority, they will be behind, as they need to first build a solid foundation—and that takes time.

**IN:** What will be your initial goals at Akin Gump?

**MMS:** I plan to spend my first 90 days in the role doing a “listening tour” across the firm, meeting with various stakeholders to gain a solid understanding of firm culture, existing D&I practices, and recent successes and areas of opportunity.

**IN:** How does an organization best cultivate a diverse talent pipeline?

**MMS:** Cultivating a diverse talent pipeline is a multifaceted, ongoing endeavor. At all times, specific and deliberate strategies must be employed to drive both external diverse talent sourcing and internal diverse talent development, retention, and promotion. In short, once you recruit traditionally underrepresented groups into your workforce, you must work diligently to engage them, retain them, and help them progress in the pipeline.

Externally, employers must seek out talent from a variety of diverse sources, and often this involves the need to build relationships with new external partners where access to a wide array of diverse talent can be leveraged. Alongside this effort, deliberate care must be taken to ensure that, internally, talent is developed, mentored, sponsored, and included in selection processes for promotions and succession planning.

**IN:** How will the CDO role change in the next five years? Will more be expected of CDOs?

**MMS:** The CDO role is changing and will continue to evolve over the next five years. In organizations where D&I is an area of focus, leaders have recognized that D&I is not the

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sole responsibility of the CDO, but rather the responsibility of everyone at the organization from the top down. Leaders have also recognized that D&I should be part of all aspects of the talent life cycle—recruiting, development, etcetera—and its business strategy planning—multicultural marketing and supplier diversity. That said, the CDO is no longer the “one-stop shop,” or sole owner, of all things D&I. Rather, the CDO is becoming more of a collaborator, dot connector, and coordinator of D&I efforts being driven by many across the organization. Simply put, the CDO is working as more of an enterprise-wide strategist to advise and counsel leaders on their local D&I efforts.

**IN:** As more and more millennials join the job force, and as baby boomers are slowly aging, has this phenomenon provided challenges? What are your suggestions for addressing them?

**MMS:** The meeting of millennials and baby boomers in the workplace has indeed presented challenges for organizations. As a result of the varying perspectives these generational groups bring to the table, each presents different work styles—slow to consensus build versus quick to move to immediate results—and modes of communication—face-to-face versus video conference or text message. In addition, each has a different appetite with respect to changing company practices: maintain status quo because it works versus moving to try something new to become more effective and drive innovation. Finally, each group comes to the table with different expectations from the workplace. For example, millennials expect organizations to be more socially responsible, committed to community service, and open to flexible work than any generation before them.

Whereas many see this challenge as insurmountable, I see it as a great opportunity. Taking the diverse perspectives of both generational groups indeed can yield more innovative outcomes and solutions. For example, I have led a multigenerational BRG [business resource group] that hosted an innovation challenge. As part of this challenge, multigenerational teams were formed with the task of coming up with new client solutions. The outcome was far better than expected. From these teams came more than 85 new ideas to serve our clients, and many were incorporated into use by the businesses. In surveying the teams after the challenge, it became clear that the diverse perspectives that these generations brought to the table led to the new ideas.

**IN:** What are some of the recent thought-leader topics in the world of inclusion that organizations are learning about and implementing?

**MMS:** Among recent thought-leader topics in the world of inclusion are unconscious bias awareness, conscious inclusion practices, global cultural competence, and navigating racial/religious/LGBT issues during troubling social times in the US.





**IN:** Tell us about your greatest success story.

**MMS:** I am pleased to say that I have had many successes in my work as a D&I leader. I could point to many statistics and other quantifiable results to demonstrate that. However, if I had to identify my greatest success on this journey, it would not necessarily be quantifiable by way of a statistic. What I am most proud of is the impact that I had on engaging leaders.

When I took on my previous role, at Prudential, I was charged with rolling out a refreshed D&I strategy and getting leaders across the company to buy into it. Not only was I able to get them to buy in, understand, and fully commit, but over the past five years I have watched them fully and literally engage as D&I advocates driving D&I efforts locally in their own business areas. Long gone are the days when I have to actually drive a D&I effort myself. Rather, the leaders are willingly driving their own efforts with passion, interest, and commitment. They have also leaned into understanding their own unconscious biases and have taken me up on the offer to learn how to become more consciously inclusive. To me, this success is greater than any

number I can point to. To touch the lives of these individuals has made the ride well worth it.

**IN:** There is a much greater emphasis in recent years on inclusion. Has that superseded diversity as the focus and, if so, why?

**MMS:** In organizations where D&I is a priority, inclusion has become an increased area of focus as they begin to realize that it is not just important to recruit a diverse workforce, but also critically important to engage and retain that diverse workforce. There is an appreciation of the fact that to recruit talent and then lose that talent due to either lack of engagement or employee feelings of exclusion is an expensive proposition. There is also an appreciation that diverse teams garner better outcomes and solutions. To that end, it has been my experience that the work of inclusion requires just as much care and attention, and perhaps more in some cases, as the work of ensuring diverse representation in the workplace.

**IN:** What brought you to do this work? Is there a personal motivation, a story from your childhood or past that inspired you in this direction?

**MMS:** From a personal perspective, I have always been curious and excited to meet and discover new people and cultures. As a host to international exchange students in my home for a 10-year period, I was privileged to meet people from several countries with different religious beliefs, ethnic backgrounds, social norms, etcetera. It was eye-opening and incredibly enriching. Then, as an employment attorney, I realized that many of the cases I litigated came about as a result of people failing to appreciate diverse perspectives, failing to be comfortable communicating or engaging with a person of difference, or failing to recognize their unconscious bias. I saw an opportunity to get ahead of this via the work of D&I, where I could proactively address these issues as opposed to reactively trying to patch things up on the back end. It has indeed been an honor and privilege to do this great work of D&I leadership.

**IN:** What are the biggest issues and challenges for corporate diversity and inclusion leaders right now?

**MMS:** The biggest challenge for D&I leaders has been, and continues to be, navigating through tough social times in the US, where racial tensions and religious tensions, among other things, are at an all-time high. Managing through these issues requires a high level of self-awareness, thoughtfulness, and discretion like no other D&I challenge. **IN**