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For the First Time Ever, More Women Than Men Have Seats at the Table

BY DEBORAH WEINSTEIN

The *Philadelphia Lawyer* magazine will begin its 73rd volume of publication this year. Earlier this year, a quasi-historic event occurred for this magazine's Editorial Board.

Longtime Editorial Board member Steve LaCheen was the first to notice it. When he arrived at a recent Board meeting, Steve looked around at those seated at the conference room table and knew something was different, but what was it?

"Am I in the wrong room?" he asked himself.

It was the right room, but things sure did look different, he thought. When he realized why, he announced with a mixture of surprise and pride, "This meeting of the Editorial Board is different in one particular way from any other I have attended in my 34 years on the Board," he said. "For the first time, there are more women here than men."

What Steve noticed was actually a bigger change than what either he or I had realized at that moment. Take a look at the list of Editorial Board members on the magazine's masthead. We actually are a rather diverse team, not by every measure but enough to have made me stop and think about how much each of us brings to the table that is unique.

By "diverse" team, I mean that *we differ from one another and are alike along many dimensions*. The scope of our differences and similarities encompasses all aspects of who we are. We come from different backgrounds. Our life experiences vary. Our personalities run the gamut. We are engaged in a wide range of practice settings – private practice including large and midsized

firms, sole and small firm practitioners, academics, government attorneys, general counsel and public interest lawyers. We also are a diverse group with regard to age, race, gender, color, religion and national origin.

As Steve's comment suggests, this has not always been the case. For instance, at my first meeting of the Editorial Board in 1999, I was the only woman attorney in the room. I soon learned that there actually was a woman who was member of the Board at that time, Justine Gudenas.

I cannot tell you how happy I was to see Justine walk through the door at the next meeting I attended. We weren't a "critical mass," but at least I wasn't alone.

Justine holds the distinction of being the first ever woman to serve on the Editorial Board, and the first to have served as Editor-in-Chief of this publication, which she did in 2004.

Has the evolution of the Editorial Board's composition into a more diverse group altered the content of the magazine? If so, how has it influenced what is published?

Perhaps a rigorous research study could tell us, but we do know that diverse groups are thought to make better decisions because they must resolve their different views before reaching consensus. Social psychologist Irving Janis identified this dynamic in his classic, psychological studies of groups. Janis developed the concept of "groupthink" as an explanation for why decision-making in some groups is characterized by uncritical acceptance and conformity at the expense of independent thinking, creativity and consideration



Photography by Tommy Leonardi

of new ideas. Decision-making teams, according to this Janis' theory, are especially vulnerable to groupthink when their members share similar backgrounds. Having a more diverse group, therefore, is one way to guard against the drawbacks of groupthink.

'A Seat at the Table – Not the Kids' Table and Not an Invisible Seat'

Discussion of the Editorial Board's diversity takes on additional significance at this time. It dovetails with our Bar Association's restatement of its long-term commitment to "continuing both the Association's and individual members' work to achieve diversity within our legal community."

In June of 2008, the Board of Governors adopted a Statement of Diversity Principles reaffirming the Association's commitment to promoting diversity and inclusion in the profession. It defines diversity broadly to include "race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation and gender identify, and many other aspects of diversity." It also makes clear that the Association's diversity initiatives are enduring. "Creating a diverse and inclusive environment," it states, "is a long-term commitment to the future of the profession, and achieving diversity is a continuing process that requires a continued commitment by the bar."

In the fall of 2009, a special Diversity Summit was convened to devise the Association's first ever "Action Plan for Diversity." Beginning with an exploration of the meaning of diversity, the participants discussed not only their own experiences but also what they believed the future of diversity should be for the Bar Association and how best to achieve it.

Then Association Chancellor Sayde J. Ladov's description of the definition of diversity harkens back to LaCheen's observation. Diversity, she said, means, "a seat at the table – not the kids' table and not an invisible seat."

'It Was 34 Years Ago Today'

When he joined the magazine's Editorial Board in 1975, Steve was not thinking about who would be on the Board 34 years later. In view of Sadye's comment and the Association's "Action Plan for Diversity," I have been thinking about the Editorial Board of the future. How will it look 34 years from now? Who will have "a seat at the table?"

It is predicted that by 2050, half of the country's population will be people of color. Given that prediction and the Association's commitment to advancing diversity, the Editorial Board of the future could potentially be an even more diverse team.

I have put on my calendar for 34 years from now: "Stop by a meeting of the Editorial Board of *The Philadelphia Lawyer*, or whatever it will be called then, and find out." I'll let you know what I see by e-mail . . . or by whatever way we're communicating then. ■

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