Diversity in Practice

*post-post-racial*

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Post-racial. The phrase is dominating conversations on diversity and inclusion and has become an obligatory aspect of nearly every conference, seminar and workshop on diversity. If you Google “post-racial,” you get no less than 8.5 million hits, most of which posted after 2007. The phrase, although around for years, gained its greatest traction during the 2008 presidential campaigns, and we have now heard about Obama as a post-racial president, America entering a post-racial era, the new realities of post-racial politics, and post-racial workplaces.

The phrase has become part of our daily dialogues on racial/ethnic diversity, but what does it really mean? The dictionary definition of “post-” as a prefix leads us to interpret post-racial as “after racial” or “subsequent to racial,” which suggests that we should think of post-racial as what exists when we have done away with race. Yet, none of the articles or conversations seem to be suggesting that we have gotten rid of or are preparing to get rid of race as a social category. So, what do we really mean when we refer to Obama or our nation or our workplaces as post-racial?

At a recent large conference of legal employers, I informally started asking lawyers of all races what the phrase “post-racial workplace” meant to them.

Many racial/ethnic minorities perceived the phrase as a negative one that connoted a premature end to their workplaces’ efforts to achieve racial equity. As one Hispanic man said, “post-racial doesn’t mean that we don’t still have racial inequality...it just means that we aren’t going to talk about it anymore.” An African American woman laughed and stated that “post-racial means that since a black man is in the White House, all talk of racial disadvantage has officially come to an end.”

Whites, on the other hand, generally perceived the phrase to be a positive indicator that racial issues did not dominate our perspectives of each other to the extent that they used to. “Post-racial means that we don’t look to race to form opinions about each other anymore,” was one response. “It means that we can finally move on to discuss other things like socioeconomic status or religion,” was another response. There were some whites, however, who felt that the phrase was a “convenient excuse to stop doing what people did not want to be doing anyway.”

Although my study was neither formal nor scientific, the answers to my question anecdotally indicated that an individual’s race did inform his or her definition of “post-racial.” While many whites
viewed post-racialness as a desirable destination, most racial/ethnic minorities felt that the phrase denigrated what they considered to be positive aspects of their identities.

As many legal workplaces use the start of a new year to reevaluate and rearticulate their diversity missions and objectives, it is important to root our efforts in the reality that race/ethnicity is a critical aspect of individual and community identity, for whites and racial/ethnic minorities alike. Even as we strive to decrease the impact of race in how we view each other, we need to acknowledge race in order to transcend it.

Although whites are about 70% of the U.S. population (and only about 50% of the cities with the largest legal markets), they are 78% of all law students and 89% of all lawyers (www.bls.gov). Whites are also 85% of all federal judges and 94% of large law firm partners (www.nalp.org). The election of an African American president was progress, but it did not create any real changes in workplaces generally or in the legal profession specifically.

Further, recent studies by the Law School Admissions Council and the National Association of Law Placement have found that instead of the percentage of racial/ethnic minorities increasing in law school and the legal profession, the percentage is actually declining due to the economic downturn. If our profession does not yet look like our general population, is it even possible for us to talk about our workplaces as post-racial?

In defining a workplace (or society or individual) as “post-racial,” we set race up as an impediment that needs to be overcome or a nuisance that needs to be removed instead of as a cultural identity that needs to be recognized and respected. If we deem our workplaces to already be post-racial, we view the current overrepresentation of whites at every level as natural instead of as an artificial consequence of racial privilege.

Diversity efforts have to disaggregate a presidential election from progress in the workplace and communicate that a “post-racial” world is not the ideal; a “post-racial bias” world is. We have to work to ensure that, in each of our workplaces, one’s race cannot statistically predict one’s career trajectory, compensation or long term success. We need to insist we don’t have to leave our racial identities behind in order reduce racial biases. The economic uncertainties make all of this harder to do even as they make our efforts more necessary than ever.

My wish for this New Year is that we advance to the “post-post-racial” conversation that allows to get back to work on real diversity and inclusion.