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A Clarion Call

Palmore's challenge pushed law firms to increase diversity in their ranks.

The American Lawyer July 29, 2013

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Leadership Council on Legal Diversity's Roderick Palmore

Ackerman and Gruber

Legal Diversity.)

Lots of lawyers say they're interested in a diverse workplace. But Roderick "Rick" Palmore had the vision and initiative to take steps to advance that goal. In 2004, when Palmore was general counsel of Sara Lee Corporation, he issued "A Call to Action," a message to outside counsel that diversity would be a factor in hiring and retaining law firms. More important, he convinced more than 100 other companies to join his challenge.

"It was a very bold step," says Robert Grey, the former president of the American Bar Association. "Those firms that chose not to [use diverse teams] might find their work shrinking." (Grey is now executive director of another Palmore creation, the Leadership Council on

Palmore, now the general counsel of General Mills Inc., didn't collect data on how firms responded to the initiative, but the move got people's attention. Anecdotally, Palmore heard from minority lawyers that it helped their careers. "They told me they had opportunities they wouldn't have otherwise received," he says. "That kind of evidence alone was worth the effort."



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Five years later, Palmore decided that a different approach was needed. Instead of having GCs lecture law firms, he wanted the two groups to work collaboratively. "My conclusion was, if we're going to make the kind of change and progress we want to see, we have to get beyond the accusations and finger-pointing stage," he explains. After bringing more than 100 lawyers from law firms and companies together for a frank discussion on diversity at a 2009 meeting in Scottsdale, Arizona, Palmore and a small group of general counsel created the LCLD to advance diversity in the profession. Today 70 companies and 138 law firms are members. Among its offerings for minority law students and lawyers is a mentoring program for accomplished midlevel lawyers who aspire to top leadership positions. Nearly 450 lawyers have participated. Palmore says it's too soon to quantify results, but participants and their employers have been enthusiastic.

"[Palmore has] arguably had a bigger impact over the last 15 years than any other single individual on the way large law firms think about diversity," says Microsoft Corporation general counsel Bradford Smith, who will become chairman of LCLD in September. "His creation of the Call to Action really put diversity on the agenda for large law firms in a way they could not ignore." With the creation of the LCLD, Smith says, Palmore took his mission a step further by creating a vehicle "to translate that original vision into concrete reality."

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