Perspectives on inclusion

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What does it mean to foster a culture of diversity, inclusion and belonging in the workplace, and how do we ensure that theory translates into practice? BLG explored this vital conversation in *Perspectives on Inclusion*, a seminar that united top clients and legal peers to share personal experiences, best practices and forward-thinking results.

Entrepreneur and transformative leadership expert Zahra Al-Harazi's provocative keynote address, entitled *Different Is Good*, set the stage for an interactive panel discussion moderated by Tamara Tomomitsu, Chair of BLG's Diversity and Inclusion Council. The panel featured insights from Michelle Henry, Partner in BLG's Labour & Employment Group; Colin Druhan, Executive Director at Pride at Work Canada; Shawn L. Graham, Deputy General Counsel, Retail Banking & Wealth Management at HSBC Bank Canada; and Caroline Jimdar, Senior Director — Business Risk & Governance — Cards, Payments & Banking at Royal Bank of Canada.

Al-Harazi's keynote began by illuminating her experience as a woman, a racialized person and an immigrant. Born in Uganda during the reign of Idi Amin, Al-Harazi was raised in Yemen, where, she states, "the birth of a girl is lamented." She eventually settled in Canada with her family, only to discover that while her new home was a "fantastic land of opportunity," prospects weren't equally accessible.
Al-Harazi linked her early experiences to current questions of diversity and inclusion by recalling the fear that she would not be able to participate fully in mainstream Canadian society, a common thread also woven throughout the attendant panel discussion.

Al-Harazi's keynote emphasized that connection and belonging are integral to a sense of well-being and autonomy in the workplace, a theme reinforced in a robust and candid discussion that explored diversity and inclusion across a range of lenses, including age, ability, race, social class, religion, gender identity and sexual orientation.

The panel discussion isolated common barriers to inclusion, including stigma, bias, lack of opportunity and enduring misinformation about marginalized communities, and pinpointed how exclusionary actions and policies can take insidious and overt forms. For example, BLG's Michelle Henry shared the experience of having her role questioned in a meeting, while Pride at Work's Colin Druhan recalled being told that his voice was "too gay" to work in a drive-through window.

The title of Al-Harazi's keynote highlights the fact that people are often socialized to fear difference, which can manifest in conscious and unconscious biases. In the business world, this translates into the reality that people tend to hire those who look like them. For example, a mere 8.5 per cent of the highest-paid positons in Canada's Top 100-listed companies are held by women; only 40 per cent of immigrants find work related to their expertise; and 77 per cent of participating audience members indicated that they had experienced unconscious bias in an interactive poll.

Ensuring that diversity and inclusion are built into an enterprise's mandate is clearly an ethical imperative, but it's also demonstrably good for business. For example, racially diverse teams outperform non-diverse teams by 35 per cent, while teams where men and women are equal earn 41 per cent more revenue.

To that end, Al-Harazi noted that there is a "new world order: loyalty to companies that are making a difference." So how do enterprises create that difference? Most pointedly, she stated that workplaces need to change, rather than the people affected by exclusionary policies and beliefs.

Workplaces must ensure that their external efforts are reflected internally — a commitment beyond one-time workshops and memos peppered with diversity-related buzzwords. Mandates must be visible, unilaterally supported by leadership and embedded throughout an enterprise's entire structure and culture.

The panel discussion generated a number of tactics and strategies to empower underrepresented groups in navigating the corridors of power, including:

- providing flexible work options
- amplifying the voices of diversity champions and mentors
- examining accessibility in terms of invisible and visible disabilities
- examining barriers in the pipeline to leadership roles
- educating employees on how to be engaged allies
- setting performance objectives and measures that are less subjective
- creating ongoing resources and training
- engaging in active listening and allowing people to articulate their own experiences

A diverse and inclusive workplace is critical to employee wellness and an enterprise's success. BLG is committed to translating theory into practice, a mandate perfectly articulated in Vernā Myers' quote: "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance."

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