

Life Lessons

Diversity leader Kelvin Womack shares why it's important to have a culture of free expression



Former Marine, **Kelvin Womack**, may have come from a tough and disciplined background, but he's got a warm and engaging personality and values the relationships he's developed with people — from all walks of life—above all else. We sat down with Kelvin — who is a principal within Deloitte Consulting LLP and Deloitte's managing principal for Diversity — to learn about what Deloitte is doing to strengthen our inclusive culture so that all our people feel they have the ability to live and work freely and openly.

First, tell us a little bit about your background and family.

I was raised by two very strong women, my mother and my great grandmother, who laid the foundation for who I am today. I'm the eldest of seven children and we grew up in poverty.

It was during my early teenage years that I first started on the trajectory toward realizing my goals and dreams. I was very fortunate that there were people who recognized my potential and took an interest in me, helping me to understand that I could overcome my current circumstances.

During my junior year in high school, my counselor suggested that I apply for a congressional nomination to the U.S. Air Force Academy. This advice changed my life. However, instead of the Air Force, I chose the U.S. Naval Academy. Frankly, as a 17-year-old, my decision was based on which uniform would look better, as well as the idea that going Navy would keep me close to the ocean.

I was the first person in my family to attend college and had never been away from home. I took a bus to Annapolis, making the trip alone because my parents could not afford to accompany me. It was my very first lesson on taking a calculated risk and letting my instincts guide me.

After graduation, I joined the Marines. It was my next great leap of faith. I chose the Marines because the lieutenant colonel in charge of my battalion at the Naval Academy was a Marine. He'd taken the time to mentor me and made an indelible impression. While I was stationed in El Toro, CA, I met my wife, Marlene who is from Sweden and was in the U.S. working as an au pair. Once we married, my priorities shifted and I decided to leave the military so that I could focus my energies on raising a family. After some very difficult failed pregnancies, we decided to adopt our two wonderful children: Amanda (21) and Joshua (18). They have been the greatest gift in our lives.

What has your career path looked like?

After I left the Marines, I joined KPMG Peat Marwick in Newport, RI, to serve a US Navy client. My first assignments involved Program and Financial Management for the Mk 48 torpedo program.

The most defining decision in my consulting career came when I was asked to relocate to Washington DC in 1995 (as a manager), to lead a small team for a data warehousing project with a new client. I told my wife that this was my chance to make partner at KPMG. I knew it was a risk to make this move with my young family, but I was very motivated because I knew I would be part of building our business within the Federal civilian agencies. The client's business grew quickly and I was able to leverage my new skills and client relationships to help grow our Federal Health and Human Services (HHS) business.

In 1997, nine years after joining KPMG, I was admitted to the partnership. During my journey to partner, I was inspired by leaders who'd paved the way in building our Federal and Defense systems integration businesses from the ground up.

In 2009, I came to Deloitte as part of the BearingPoint acquisition. I was asked to continue leading our Federal Health business, which is now one of the largest segments in our Federal practice. Our success has accelerated as a result of becoming a part of Deloitte's tremendously successful Life Sciences & Health Care practice.

Since joining Deloitte, I've also had the privilege to co-lead the U.S. Firms' Nominating Committee, which is an integral part of our governance system. Our employees should be proud of the fact that we have this annual process where partners from across our businesses provide their feedback on how our leaders are performing, as well as their recommendations for new board members. This opportunity was one of the highlights of my career as it afforded me exposure to a large number of partners, many of whom I otherwise may never have met.

Why did you decide to take on the role leading Diversity for Deloitte?

I am proud to be a part of an organization that truly espouses inclusion and diversity, and believe we are a stronger business as a result. When our Chief Inclusion Officer **Deb DeHaas** approached me about the role, I saw this as a very unique leadership opportunity — one that I've become more passionate about as my career has progressed.

I'm extremely fortunate to have been a part of so many prestigious, high-performing organizations — each of which has faced challenges developing and retaining diverse leaders. Our people need to see our leaders' career examples as something they can both aspire to and attain. It is also important for our people and clients to see representation in Deloitte's leadership ranks that is reflective of our workforce demographics and the clients we serve. Our people must be prepared to lead a workforce that possesses a kaleidoscope of perspectives, and every person at Deloitte has a meaningful role to play in evolving our inclusive culture.

As workforce demographics become more diverse and minorities soon become the majority, will diversity have a strong business case?

Diversity will always have a strong business case. It's not just about race, gender, culture, sexual orientation or all the other ways in which we classify differences. Diversity is also about the variety of perspectives that are accumulated through life experiences. In this context, it does not matter who is a minority or non-minority. What matters are the experiences that our people bring to the table and having a culture that not only values different experiences, but also leverages them to better serve our clients.

Can you talk about the importance of finding common ground?

People relate more strongly to someone with whom they feel they share something in common, than they do with those they perceive as being "different." It's one of the reasons we have business resource groups (BRGs), where our practitioners have the opportunity to connect with others who have similar backgrounds, cultures, interests and experiences.

Finding common ground and revealing the ways in which we are similar is an effective way to build more inclusive cultures because it erases risks and increases feelings of well-being and security. However, it does require that we share more of who we are and necessitates stepping outside of our comfort zones. This is a paradox we face in strengthening our culture. In order to get maximum value from our differences, we need to pave the way by uncovering areas in which we are the same.

This past spring, Deloitte launched a "Share your story" campaign that encourages our people to share their personal experiences, so that we can all gain a better understanding of each other. We started with our leaders sharing their career and life stories through video vignettes, which inspired a number of our people to share their own stories, ultimately amplifying the feeling of belonging at Deloitte.

Which historical figure inspires you the most?

Martin Luther King Junior. Growing up, I remember watching Dr. King on television and being inspired by his words. I could relate to everything he was saying about the need for equality for all people – not just Blacks. Growing up in the South during the Civil Rights Movement, we learned, first-hand, that separate schools were definitely not equal. When we moved from Florida to Ohio, I went from being a straight "A" student to a "B/C" student for the first semester in a non-segregated school. It took me six months to get back to top academic performance.

When President Obama won the election in 2008, it was a very emotional moment for me. Our kids, on the other hand, did not really understand the significance. To them it was not a big deal that a bi-racial person was going to be our president, even though they knew it was a historic event. To some degree, I realized that the fact that they didn't "get it" was actually an indication that Dr. King's dream has moved closer toward reality. I only wish my mother had been there to see it.

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