

An Inclusive Culture

An Interview with Phyllis A. James,
Executive Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer, MGM Resorts International

EDITORS' NOTE Phyllis James, Executive Vice President, Chief Diversity Officer, and Special Counsel-Litigation, joined MGM Resorts in March 2002. She was listed among the Top Influential Women in Corporate America for 2014 by Savoy Magazine and the Top 100 Executives in Corporate America for 2012 by Uptown Professional Magazine. Among other recognitions, the Women's Chamber of Commerce of Nevada inducted her into its Hall of Fame in 2014, bestowing her with the Minority Lifetime Achievement award. In December 2012, she was cited as one of Las Vegas' top 12 business leaders by Vegas Inc. James graduated Magna Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in American History and Literature from Harvard/Radcliffe College. She earned her J.D. from Harvard Law School.



Phyllis A. James

Are you where you want to be in regard to diversity and inclusion efforts?

No, because this is a very long journey. MGM Resorts has gone about this in as correct a way as a company can because it treated it, first and foremost, not as a feel-good program but as a business imperative to treat people equally. They saw the need for it to be embedded at the heart of a business – especially a hospitality company because we are a people-based business. We always say, “The world works here

and the world plays here.”

People are at the center of the services, amenities, and attractions that our company provides. If nothing else, we ought to be specialists in people relationships, and diversity and inclusion is an essential part of that equation.

Since I've been here, we have been serious about building a business infrastructure that supports diversity and inclusion as an institutional core value of our culture and our operation.

We have invested millions in developing an infrastructure to attract diverse talent. We also make sure all of our diversity and inclusion programs are accessible to our employees. We make sure all of our operations incorporate diversity.

Does diversity and inclusion go hand in hand?

It's not enough to just have diversity in terms of headcount. Diversity refers to differences that include different segments of the workforce: people with different genders or race, or disabilities.

Inclusion is the key part of how a company leverages diversity to make it a competitive difference for the company.

I use diversity as a proxy for ideas but inclusion is the practice that says to a company they should be tapping into it to make sure that they recognize and value every member of the team and to make sure every member of the team is contributing to the mission of the company.

Many companies talk about innovation and innovation usually happens when there are many people sharing ideas. It's not one person.

Better practices come from collaborative teamwork.

Is the right dialogue taking place when it comes to providing opportunities for women?

By now, companies should have woken up to the fact that women bring many talents that are essential to making stronger, better companies. It's only because of the historical legacy of exclusion of women that we have such disparity between the representation of women at higher position levels at companies across the board in corporate America.

Part of that has been the old social paradigm that has women primarily being at home raising the kids and men out in the workforce. As we know, the economic and social trends are just the opposite now.

There does have to be a concerted effort on the part of companies to try to make it an even playing field for women in their workforces, and to make sure that they're going after top talent, not only male talent but female talent as well.

The disparities in the representation of women continue in higher positions and certainly on boards. But there will be more inroads because there are more pressures now on companies to make sure they're doing everything they can to promote equal opportunity for women.

Do MGM's areas of corporate philanthropy need to align with the business?

We always have to start with the position that we are a for-profit, publicly owned company and our shareholders expect us to make a profit. However, we also need to be responsible in the way we go about conducting our business and generating that profit.

Consumers also expect that we are supporting the communities in which we do business.

It makes sense that we would want to support things that align with our business.

Public education is one of our core areas of support because the broad base of our workforce is produced by our public education system. We're the largest taxpayer in the state of Nevada and most of our employees are at our hub. So it's in our interests to make sure we support an education system that is producing most of our workforce.

Health and wellness is another focus area for us, as is alleviating hunger and affordable housing. Our host community is where our employees live and work so we are making sure that our host communities are viable, stable environments, and that we're supporting our workforce.

A large part of the social services infrastructure that exists in a community affords a diverse clientele and that is very important to us because that is important to supporting a stable, viable community. ●

When you joined MGM Resorts International in 2002, what excited you about the opportunity and what has made MGM so special for you?

The thing that attracted me to MGM Resorts was that the company had announced a voluntary diversity and inclusion initiative and the Chairman of MGM Resorts at the time, Terry Lanni, was personally involved in recruiting me.

He was hiring me as a lawyer and a part of the corporate legal team, but he also wanted part of my legal responsibilities to be supporting the company's board of directors' diversity committee.

This was a very important business initiative that MGM Resorts had undertaken and since the Chairman was the champion of the initiative, I knew it wouldn't be just another HR program.

It was also made clear to me that MGM Resorts was a leader in the gaming and hospitality industry. This would give me an opportunity to build a pioneering initiative in this industry.