

# LEADERSHIP IN DEI



Interview with:

**Stephanie Braming, CFA**

*Partner, Global Head of Investment Management*

*How is William Blair embracing the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)?*

Firmwide, our vision is to be the premier global boutique, and the way we execute on that is to attract and retain the best and brightest by fostering intellectual curiosity, dialogue and debate across our investment, infrastructure and distribution teams, each of which encourages and celebrates diversity of thought, age and perspective. So, we think of DEI as linked inextricably with our mission, vision and values.

Within the investment team specifically, as active investors it's important for us to assess growth trajectories, valuations, opportunities and risks across asset classes, countries, securities and sectors. To do that, we need a culture that embraces differences and mental flexibility, yet provides focus. We want to attract and retain colleagues who thrive in our non-hierarchical environment, possess characteristics of curiosity and, very importantly, contribute a diversity of perspectives that enriches our culture.

*What have you learned from portfolio management that helps you better manage human capital?*

Before taking this role in late 2017, I was a portfolio manager for non-U.S. equity portfolios totalling about \$17 billion in assets. As a portfolio manager on our global equity team, I invested in companies across the market capitalization spectrum in many



William Blair Investment Management colleagues Gil Fitzgerald, Corwin Marbly and Xiaowei Hargrove meet for a post-lockdown happy hour in Chicago in the fall of 2021.

industries and countries. These companies had different management teams, competitive advantages, company histories, earnings growth and return profiles, and valuations. But by combining companies that demonstrated growth potential and sustainable value creation into diversified portfolios, we delivered better risk-adjusted returns for our clients.

There are parallels between managing human capital and managing investment portfolios. Our goal is to nurture vibrant teams that are stronger together than individually. Tying each individual back to our firm's purpose is important, just like tying each company back to our investment philosophy is important. And while team members must embrace our firm's culture, they should not all have the same background or life experience because you get a "diversity bonus" when you add individuals who can foster debate and foster different viewpoints. I believe this ultimately leads to better outcomes for our clients.

*How can unconscious bias negatively affect both investors and teams – and how do you tackle it?*

It's important to be purposeful about not taking the well-travelled route from an investment perspective. One way to combat unconscious bias is to purposefully seek new ideas in unobvious spaces, to connect these ideas into new insights, to critically

question assumptions, and to encourage teams to learn new things, make mistakes and explore nonlinear career paths. Another antidote to unconscious bias is to build teams that include a broad array of backgrounds and mental models. We've developed cross-sectional working groups that span generations, gender and tenure across our investment, infrastructure and distribution teams to answer critical questions for our firm. In the end, these recommendations are more robust, given those diverse perspectives and experience. Finally, we're making it a priority to help individuals and teams develop soft skills such as leadership, collaboration, empathy, coaching, having difficult conversations and identifying blind spots.

*How can a focus on DEI improve decision-making and performance in investments and teams?*

The power of teams and the power of collaboration cannot be overstated. That's a substantial shift in mindset for our industry where the star manager has been celebrated for decades. Different viewpoints coming from different backgrounds, philosophies, perspectives, experiences and expertise are critical. I believe that helps with decision-making, meeting clients' objectives and, ultimately, leads to improved results.

*William Blair*