

The importance of affinity groups: how to never feel alone

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When you're tracking your life in six-minute increments and are focused on accumulating billable hours, acquiring stretch assignments and seeking business development opportunities, it may not seem advantageous to invest time and resources into internal affinity groups. Failing to do so, however, may hinder your growth and lead to burnout. Affinity groups at large firms are critical to the success of individual attorneys as well as to the firm as a whole, particularly as we move away from Webex and Zoom and return to the office.

In the fall of my third year of law school, having already accepted an offer to join Skadden upon graduation, I was invited to attend the firm's first Black & African American Attorneys Affinity Group conference. This conference was my introduction to the power of professional affinity groups, and it shaped my career in ways I never could have appreciated at the time.

A Skadden alumnus, who was at the time a global head of a top tier investment bank, discussed the importance of beginning to build your reputation on day one. The former chairman and CEO of a major media company imparted wisdom during his keynote that I still pass along to my mentees: "Be the person other people want to root for."

And although both of these speakers and the other distinguished panelists were insightful and inspiring, the most impactful moments were those with my peers in conference rooms, around dinner tables and even on the dance floor — a group of young Black attorneys itching for success.

We talked about how to be your authentic self and still be successful at the firm; we shared stories about exciting projects and interesting cases; we discussed finding work-life balance and ways to avoid burnout; and we discussed the stress of the bar exam and being nervous about receiving results (and I vividly remember a recent graduate, and now close friend, cry and embrace his partner mentor after learning he passed the California bar that weekend). We ate, laughed, and organically developed bonds with people who had similar stories and backgrounds and who would face similar challenges over the course of our careers. I felt connected and empowered, and I hadn't even officially joined the firm.

So what is an affinity group and why is it important?

An affinity group is simply a group of people with similar characteristics and a natural liking or sympathy for one another.

At Skadden, we have 10 affinity networks:

- (1) Asian Pacific Islander
- (2) Black Lawyers for Diversity
- (3) FAM (Parents)
- (4) First Gen
- (5) Latinx
- (6) LGBTQ+
- (7) Middle Eastern & North African
- (8) South Asian
- (9) SkadVets (Military Veterans)
- (10) Women's Initiatives

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Each group meets regularly, hosts speakers and events and provides mentorship. Frequently, members have similar stories and backgrounds and they deal with many of the same stereotypes and stigmas in their personal and professional lives. Although they may feel imposter syndrome in the office, it is easier to overcome within the affinity group. The affinity towards one another makes it easy to develop organic and meaningful relationships that allow for raw and vulnerable conversations.

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Never was this more evident to me than in November 2016. On election night, I sat alone and confused in my one-bedroom apartment. I went to the office the next day like everyone else — and

it was the best thing I could have done. By mid-afternoon, most of our affinity group was gathered in a conference room.

Because of our shared experience, we felt similar pain, confusion, anger and frustration. Thankfully, we had each other and didn't need to face these feelings alone. Once the venting ended, we shifted our focus and energy, and by the following week we participated in a videoconference with the Black affinity groups from each Skadden office, brainstorming actions to take individually and as a firm that would have a positive impact on our country during such a turbulent time.

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Over the years, there were more instances like this — more moments where we appreciated having a support group and a sounding board to deal with life's crises (in addition to helping us cope with the stress and pressure that comes with being an attorney at one of the world's top law firms).

And then the pandemic occurred. The monthly in-person affinity group lunches were over. I could no longer pop into my mentor's office to catch up or seek advice. Work opportunities dried up as the economy began to crumble. The outlook was dim. But there was a silver lining. Affinity groups did not go away; thanks to the growth and normalization of virtual events, they evolved and became more global. Connecting face-to-face with others outside of the office became easier.

This ability to connect on a larger scale happened just in time as the murder of George Floyd and America's subsequent awakening to systemic racism shook the country — including its institutions such as large law firms.

Once again, our affinity groups met to vent, and once again we quickly shifted our energy to bringing about positive change. With strong affinity groups in place working more seamlessly across offices, we quickly organized and began working with firm leadership to address institutional racism. Because of the work our affinity groups do, Skadden is more diverse and inclusive than ever before.

So where do we go from here? As we leave our home offices and return to our real offices (at least part-time), it's important to remember the power of affinity groups and meeting in-person.

Below are a few tips to ensure your organization's affinity groups are benefiting attorneys and the firm as a whole:

1. Start early.

Law students should inquire about affinity groups and potentially meet members before, during and after the interview process. You want to know there's a place for you at the firm, not just work for you to do. New attorneys can then seek to join affinity group activities upon joining a firm.

2. Design for authentic and intentional leadership.

As in any group, leadership is key. Recruiting, retaining and empowering affinity group leaders through mentorship, sponsorship and resources are essential to developing a strong and authentic affinity group.

3. Meet frequently, in person, and break bread.

Until my hologram can dap up another hologram, nothing can replace in-person affinity group meetings. These shouldn't be 30-minute coffee breaks when it's convenient. Rather, they should be regular and reliable in-person events, meals, trips and conferences. It is essential to experience the fellowship, feel the hugs and hear the laughs. These gatherings establish trust among members, allowing them to be vulnerable and honest and benefit from the group's collective knowledge and experience.

4. Rely on economies of scale.

Plan events that combine offices. The pandemic spurred the widespread use of technology that allows us to easily connect with our peers in other offices. Use these extended relationships to your advantage.

Also, rely on outside resources that are already doing the work. For example, I first encountered the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity (LCLD), which is made up of more than 400 chief legal officers and law firm managing partners that have been successfully doing work in this space since 2009, as a 1L summer associate at another firm. I've remained involved in LCLD ever since, most recently participating in their Pathfinders program.

There are also a number of regional bar associations that can provide benefits akin to being in an affinity group.

5. Work closely with firm leadership.

Firm leadership controls the purse strings and is essential to recruiting and retaining top diverse talent. Use the affinity group as a platform to connect with key partners. Invite them to your events to help foster organic relationships and a better understanding of your affinity group's lived experience. And bring issues to them as a group rather than as individuals, as there is power in numbers.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Skadden or its clients.

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