

A Conversation with Mark Bunbury, Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

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Mark Bunbury, Jr. is Proskauer's Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Prior to joining Proskauer, Mark spent several years serving as a senior HR leader/EEO Officer and practiced as a Labor and Employment lawyer. Mark calls upon his knowledge of how businesses operate and his lived experiences as a first generation Afro/Indo Caribbean-American, first generation lawyer and LGBTQ+ professional to lead and champion diversity in the legal industry.

You've mentioned how your background and experiences growing up have influenced your career and your approach to D&I. Tell us a bit about your background.

I am a child of many places. Both of my parents immigrated to the United States from the Caribbean. My mother is Indo-Caribbean, and she's from Trinidad. My dad was Afro-Caribbean, a Black man from Guyana. My parents divorced when I was very young, and I moved a lot as a kid, probably every two or three years. I was born in Queens, NY and then moved between Jersey City and Florida and then the Poconos for High School.

Did you have any mentors or role models growing up?

I had people who supported me, but not necessarily people I saw as mentors. I think that had a lot to do with my own identity. I didn't necessarily see myself in a lot of other people. Yes, there were tremendous Black men and women who supported me, but I am also gay, and also have a worldview colored from many different experiences and people, and I didn't always see those things in one person I could emulate. I think I've found really incredible champions and mentors and sponsors in my time at Proskauer, and it's really opened my eyes to the reality that mentors come from surprising places, and can be there for particular reasons and perspectives, even if you don't know it at the time.

My mother has always been a hard worker and very dedicated to me, her family, friends and others. And my step-dad treats people, no matter who they are, with the utmost respect, and their kindness and loyalty has influenced how I treat others.

How would you describe your leadership style and has it evolved over time?

I think the eighth grade is probably the first leadership experience I remember. I was the captain of the Safety Patrol, and even then, I remember a really deep awareness of imposter syndrome related to being a leader.

It wasn't until I joined my fraternity in college and eventually became the vice president that I really began to understand what it meant to be a leader. Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc., is the oldest black collegiate fraternity in America. A ton of incredibly accomplished black men are Alphas, including Martin Luther King and Thurgood Marshall. That experience of being pushed to lead allowed me to change my thoughts around whether I actually *could* lead.

I try to embody many of the different traits that I think you need as a leader and model that behavior for the people I work with. I try to be really human and vulnerable, and be someone who owns mistakes and knows that you can have moments when you're having challenges and you don't know what to do -and that's okay.

What are the biggest challenges D&I is currently facing?

The number of conversations and initiatives instigated around the world is really unprecedented as a result of the murder of George Floyd. It is quite incredible how quickly and meaningfully it impacted the business world. Certainly it has changed the world at large, but in particular, we've seen this gigantic shift in organizations taking a moral, principled stance on things.

I think there's been some good progress. This year The Diversity Scorecard reported the biggest jump in diverse lawyer representation in Big Law since its inception. There's all this energy, and a lot of good things are starting to happen, but now what? Where do we go next, and how do we make sure that we are leveraging this moment for long-term, sustained change inside of organizations? I think that it's really important that people in DEI, myself included, really focus on that. Principally, because this moment is great, but this moment may change.

The idea that we can assume now that D&I will always be thought of as critical is a really dangerous assumption to make. People need to continue to create meaningful programs, initiatives, and cultural changes that ultimately give us the kind of organizations that we want to see in the world and in the legal industry.

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How do you think you are prepared to handle these challenges?

I love the theme for UK Black History Month: "Time for Change: Action, Not Words." This encompasses how I approach and feel about D&I, and why I feel prepared to meet this moment in terms of the future challenges we will be facing. I intend to leverage my experiences to provide innovative, outside of the box approaches to meet the moment in relation to the next chapter of D&I.

Because I practiced as a labor employment lawyer, I was able to build an incredible foundation for looking around corners to understand how we can best structure and approach initiatives to move diversity in the workplace forward. Along with that, I worked for several years as a senior HR leader, developing a strong understanding of organizations and how they operate overall. An HR background gives you an ability to zoom out and see the whole organization and then figure out what can work in the D&I space particularly.

But equally important, from a personal, lived experience perspective, I'm a first generation American, first generation lawyer, Afro and Indo-Caribbean, LGBTQ+, who came from very humble socio-economic beginnings. I worked really hard, did really well in college, and got into UNC Law where I became the first black person on the school's Law Review in almost three years. I was also a leader in the Black Law Student Association and graduated with honors. But in the course of that journey, I had a lot of really deep emotional experiences about my place in the law industry, and if I was worthy of it. I had no context for a lot of it. I struggled with confusion resulting from feeling like an outsider in the legal industry. I left active practice frustrated because I didn't have the insights I needed to excel. That experience was not that long ago for me and those experiences. Being able to leverage those two things together - a unique business perspective and my lived experience -and work hand in hand with our Firm leaders and lawyers and business service colleagues, allows me to really listen and hear them. This has made me well-prepared-to grapple with the next chapter of D&I in law firms.

What D&I initiatives are you most excited about leading at Proskauer and why?

I'm most excited about D&I and mental health. I feel incredibly fortunate that we have an amazing wellness manager here, Tracey Saliski, who has been a partner on this. Through our Guide and Thrive program, we have created some really impactful programs on the mental health needs of diverse lawyers. I recently presented alongside one of our Guide and Thrive therapists, Dr. Jeff Gardere, for our Sports Law CLE, where we explored the concept of "Belonging" and how it's the intersection of D&I and mental health, and we provided some great insights for organizations and leaders to follow to create a culture of belonging in their organizations. I think the intersection of diversity and inclusion and mental health is a huge issue right now and one that is not talked about nearly enough, particularly in communities of color. What is really critical is figuring out ways to put a name on these issues, and often, in communities of color, these issues go unnamed and untreated. When people are coming in the door feeling like imposters we want them to know they don't have to succumb to the anxiety and they don't have to spiral and lose connection. I think about how many people we are losing in the industry because they are grappling with those feelings and don't feel like they have a way to address it.

What is your advice to leaders that want do better in diversity and inclusion?

What do we do, how do we go forward, how do we know we're doing enough?

People often tend to think of diversity and inclusion at a very macro level. Historically, we've seen a lot of large scale initiatives and training in D&I and that's critical: implicit bias, inclusive leadership, etc. Those things have a place and purpose, and they're really valuable. But I think that D&I needs to really focus on getting more micro.

One of the things that law firms live and die by is relationships. Relationships can only be built one at a time. The power of relationships to sustain, empower and alter the course of someone's career at a firm cannot be overstated. So how do we focus on creating a deep sense of belonging and fostering limitless opportunities for relationship building and strengthening? How do we ensure that D&I is a key voice, connector and builder in that process? For instance, people often talk about how we can move the needle, I think people should examine: how regularly are you getting coffee with the diverse lawyers on your team? Are you taking them to lunch? Are they getting opportunities to stretch and get different exposure? How regularly are you leveraging your network to make sure they're being connected to resources that will be valuable to them? How comfortable are you providing constructive feedback?

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Someone once told me culture is merely the sum behavior of all leaders. I think it's a really profound way to think about, on an individual basis, what every leader should be doing to make sure that they are creating the right type of culture for their teams and their organizations.

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