

How Proskauer Makes Belonging Central To Its DEI Mission

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360 (June 8, 2023, 1:59 PM EDT) -- Proskauer Rose LLP's diversity, equity and inclusion department launched a strategic partnership with its wellness department in 2020, aimed at furthering the law firm's ongoing goal of fostering a sense of belonging among its lawyers and staff.

The firm brought on culturally competent mental health providers who provide one-on-one care to personnel and provide mental health and wellness assistance more broadly with respect to the firm's diversity-oriented groups and activities.

During 2020, much of the world was feeling an acute sense of disconnection as a result of the pandemic, and that disconnection posed a particularly significant threat when it came to long-time efforts to create inclusion and a sense of belonging within law firms, according to Proskauer's director of diversity and inclusion Mark Bunbury Jr.

"As awareness around mental health at work increases, it's critical to realize the relationship between pressure and 'otherness'. In other words, as more pressure builds, any 'otherness' a person may feel is amplified," Bunbury said. "We see this with lawyers from underrepresented groups where there are higher rates of imposter syndrome, depression, anxiety and worse."

That reality, amid the pressures of a pandemic, prompted Bunbury to forge a stronger connection between the firm's wellness department and its DEI department, and also to look for other ways to foster inclusion.

The firm engaged employee assistance provider Guide+Thrive, which supplies two full-time mental health and wellness experts who offer one-on-one counseling to anyone in the firm, and also provide a number of services specifically aimed at underrepresented lawyers and staff.

When the firm was looking at bringing in the mental health providers, Bunbury says it was a priority for him to ensure the providers were culturally competent and able to speak to issues impacting people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, women and others.

The providers have been able to do that in a number of ways, both in their one-on-one sessions, but also by attending and being a resource to affinity group meetings, heritage month events, summer associate events, the firm's

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MARK BUNBURY JR.
Proskauer

mentoring circle, and in other areas, Bunbury said.

One of the providers, for instance, provided an educational session on the particular challenges of Black mental health issues.

Bunbury's work to foster a sense of belonging goes beyond the mental health department collaboration, though, and extends to how his department approaches its work. He says his philosophy around DEI involves forging close relationships with people in the firm on an individual basis and assessing and responding to their needs in a personalized manner.

That philosophy that emphasizes personal connections has been informed by his own experience as a first-generation American, first-generation lawyer and LGBT lawyer of color. He says that over the course of his career as a lawyer, he at times felt a lack of connection with others in the industry and a sense that he didn't understand the rules of the game.

"I feel very strongly in opening up the rules of the game, laying out the chess board for lawyers from underrepresented groups especially, and focusing on one-to-one relationships so we are creating that sense of connection day in and day out."

One major way Proskauer's DEI department is able to strike up relationships with the firm's underrepresented members is that it includes a larger ratio of staff members to attorneys than many other law firms, Bunbury said.

The DEI department is made up of five full-time diversity professionals who serve the firm of 800 lawyers. That ratio of DEI staff to lawyers is fairly high compared to peers, according to Bunbury, who serves on the board of the Association of Law Firm Diversity Professionals and regularly networks with other law firm DEI leaders.

While much of the work diversity professionals do is based on data and statistics, getting down to a granular level and understanding the challenges, hopes and dreams of an individual is just as important if not more, Bunbury said.

"It's important to understand groups, but it is critical to know individuals," he said.

When new lawyers from underrepresented groups join the law firm, a member of the DEI department meets with them "immediately," offering themselves up as a resource to navigate the firm.

"We want them to know from day one we are here to make sure they feel connected to the firm and we are a resource to them," Bunbury said.

He says the team hopes to act as a bridge for the people in the firm from underrepresented groups to leadership, to partners who distribute work opportunities and mentorship, and to other sources that will help them advance in their careers.

"We know at the end of the day, relationships are so critical to success in a law firm. A lack of connection is determinative in your career," he said.

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