5 Tips and Strategies to Build a Diverse and Inclusive Law Firm

Written by Sharon Miki

When it comes to diversity and inclusion in law firms, the legal profession is struggling. It's a missed opportunity for everyone: Diverse lawyers bring diverse opinions, diverse teams make better decisions, and a more diverse and equitable legal industry drives more innovative and creative solutions.

The topic of diversity and inclusion (commonly referred to as "D&I", DEI or DIBE) in law firms has been discussed at some level at firms for many years. But just creating policies and programs is not enough. The reality is that the composition of the legal industry remains widely populated by a largely homogenous racial and gender group. According to the latest ABA National Lawyer Population Survey, 86% of lawyers are white, a statistic that hasn't changed much over the past decade. Additionally, the survey also indicated that only 37% of lawyers were female. Diversity requires greater inclusion in terms of factors like race or ethnicity, gender, disabilities, sexual orientation or identification, and age.

Now more than ever, the legal community needs to step up as leaders, counsels, and advisors with law firm diversity and inclusion. In this blog post, we will explore the topic of racial bias—and provide strategies for how you can use your law firm's brand to build a diverse and inclusive law firm.

What is racial bias?

Bias refers to a disproportionate favor towards an idea or thing. For example, an individual, a group, or a belief. Racial bias refers to biases—both implicit and explicit—related to race.

Addressing bias is incredibly important, as millions in America and across the world reckon with their own racial bias, racial injustice, and systemic racism. It's key to acknowledge that racism and biases exist in every aspect of life—including law firms.

Listen to Risha Grant, diversity & inclusion expert, speaker, founder, consultant, and author of *Get Rid of the BS: How Bias Synapse is Holding Back Your Law Firm* on *Daily Matters* as she discusses some of the most important aspects of D&I practices companies need to

think about and implement—including what law firm leaders and legal professionals can do.

Awareness

Devoting time to reflection—and fostering a culture of self-awareness—plays an important role in countering bias and promoting diversity and inclusion in law firms. When we are self-aware, we are forced to be open-minded and more cognizant of our own emotions. This helps us have more emotional intelligence. As a result, we are inherently more likely to notice biases and be appreciative of the diversity that is in our world—and our workplace.

Inherent vs. explicit bias

Bias is complex, as it can be innate or learned. More often than not, it is a result of deep-seated systemic issues. Without conscious self-reflection and a culture that encourages you to examine that bias, you may not realize it exists.

For example, you may not like the name "John" because when you were younger, a boy named John picked on you. As an adult, you may still have a bias against people named John. You would never know of your bias unless you were self-aware enough to stop and notice.

How to be mindful of bias

Mindfulness—or an ability to focus on what you're thinking or feeling—can be a useful tool for lawyers for stress relief. But it can also help attorneys tap into unconscious bias that may otherwise be overlooked. Multiple research found that when white participants practiced mindfulness and meditation, they experienced reduced automatic negative associations of Black people. To learn more about mindfulness concerning the practice of law, our *Mindfulness and the Practice of Law* webinar can provide a helpful introduction.

Learn about mindful habits you can adopt to fight bias every day.

How EQ plays into bias

How could a person notice biases or appreciate the benefits of diversity if they are not self-aware of their own emotions? Without self-awareness, how do they come across as a result of these emotions?

Your emotional intelligence (EQ) is the "level of your ability to understand other people, what motivates them, and how to work cooperatively with them." Your EQ is generally considered to be made of five components:

- Self-awareness
- Self-regulation
- Empathy
- Motivation
- Social skills

Those with low EQ or a lack of self-awareness often propagate bias and lack of diversity in law firms. This is because someone who isn't aware of their own emotions is less likely to notice bias and diversity issues as a problem.

How to improve diversity & inclusion in law firms with your brand

Everyone can play a part in becoming a catalyst for change and growth. One of the ways you can increase diversity, increase EQ, reduce bias, and build a more inclusive legal community is to develop your law firm's brand.

What is your law firm's brand?

Your law firm's brand is how your clients perceive your firm and its business. Your business brand is essential for the growth and longevity of your firm.

A good business brand is not just about having a pretty logo—every lawyer in your firm must also have an effective personal brand. If everyone at your firm looks the same—in terms of things like gender, race, age, and sexual orientation—then your brand lacks diversity. You're also likely missing out on connections with potential clients. So, by intentionally and thoughtfully creating a more diverse brand, you can help your firm grow.

Use data and metrics to make better decisions on diversity & inclusion in law firms

If law firms developed a more diverse brand, they can help improve diversity and inclusion in law firms. But how can you tangibly be sure that you're achieving those goals?

One of the most powerful ways to improve diversity and inclusion at law firms is to measure your efforts. This is what Bryan Parker, Co-founder and CEO of Legal Innovators, an innovative alternative legal service provider (ALSP), discusses on this episode of the *Daily Matters* podcast. When you set metrics goals for diversity, you give those goals teeth—so that other factors (for example, compensation for those meeting the goal) can align around them.

By using data to track and measure the success of your firm's D&I initiatives, Bryan explains, you can:

- **Learn what's working, and what isn't.** While general goals for diversity growth (such as "be more diverse") may be well-intentioned, if they have no measurement, then there is little motivation to take action or refine the process. For example, you can measure a change in the percentage of non-white employees, within a specific time frame. You can't know what works without having a clear goal post.
- **Make D&I goals imperative to your business**. Defined, measured goals also create a sense of a culture of diversity. General, untracked diversity initiatives can feel more like philanthropy—but transparent, defined goals feel like part of the law firm brand. As Bryan notes, it moves diversity from something nice to have to a business imperative.
- **Be transparent**. If you communicate to your team that you are measuring and tracking specific diversity goals, then it makes your firm's intentions clear. Being transparent can make the process feel fairer for everyone.

Strategies for re-imagining D&I within your law firm

What would a diverse workforce at your firm look like? Creating a more diverse and inclusive culture at your law firm requires active choices. Start by considering ways in which you can apply the following strategies at your firm.

1. Understand and educate your team on how to recognize bias

It's one thing to tell your team that diversity is a priority. But it's unlikely to progress without tangible efforts to recognize and counter bias.

In addition to offering team training on how to recognize bias, establish a process to allow each employee to learn and know about each other's brand, circumstances, and personal story. This knowledge will help to increase diversity and grow the firm brand.

Weekly lunchtime gatherings (even via videoconferencing if your firm is working remotely) are a great place to educate. Encourage lawyers to share who they are and their learnings on this topic—the more they talk about something, the more comfortable people will be

about the topic.

2. Build a culture of diversity and inclusion internally

To counter bias, you must intentionally take action to create an internal law firm culture and operating principles that promote diversity and inclusion. Here are some steps to encourage this:

- **Communicate**. Ensure that there is support on an organizational level for people from all demographics to discuss issues of diversity and inclusion and to have uncomfortable conversations. As Bryan notes in the podcast, the goal should be to foster a law firm culture where it's normal to ask, "Hey, are you okay?"
- **Listen to diverse groups**. To create an inclusive environment, ensure that diverse groups at your firm have a say in creating solutions.
- **Create a plan on how to manage bias and diversity issues**. Ignoring any diversity and bias issues that come up hurts your firm's brand, stunts growth, and counters the values and ethics of your firm. Have a plan in place to address these issues. For instance, it should be clear which person an attorney should talk to initially if there is an issue. What happens after that? How is the entire firm included in the issue to create a solution, and build awareness and culture? Figure it out and communicate the plan with the team. Take a look at this sample plan to get started.

3. Create an intentional hiring plan

If your goal is to foster law firm diversity and inclusion, then you must have a plan to consider diversity with every person you hire at your firm, from attorneys to staff. Create an intentional and thoughtful hiring plan that aligns with your firm's vision and values and prioritizes diversity. This is crucial to know what you want, don't want, should have, and where to find it. By having this plan ready, you can be consistent and guided when hiring.

For more tips on how law firms can hire for success, read this guide.

4. Work with bar associations

By supporting diversity and inclusion initiatives created by national, state, and local bar associations, your firm can widen its D&I scope, learn, and participate in diversity programs. This way, you can also promote diversity in the wider legal community. While the bar association programs in your jurisdiction may vary, support could include things like attending and promoting their diversity programs, encouraging firm lawyers to speak at events or volunteer, or providing financial support to programs.

5. Work with diversity & inclusion groups for working professionals

There may also be third-party groups and organizations with diversity and inclusion initiatives that your firm could participate in as a way to support and develop D&I efforts within the broader professional community. The Leadership Council on Legal Diversity (LCLD), for example, offers a Fellows Program to give attorneys at LCLD Member law firms leadership training, relationship-building opportunities, and personal and professional development opportunities.

6. Create an external communications plan that advocates for D&I culture

To truly set an example for diversity and inclusion in law firms, it's important to spend time in our communities and practices to see how we can make a difference when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the legal profession. So, be sure to create an external communications and marketing strategy that advocates for law firm diversity and inclusion.

External communication strategies could include social media posts, your law firm website, and other marketing platforms like your law firm newsletter.

To learn more about how to grow your law firm through ethical legal marketing, watch this webinar.

Conclusion

Inclusive teams reflect the diversity in our communities, which means that they can make better decisions and find more innovative solutions. This is key to positive law firm culture, profitability, and growth. However, many firms still struggle with law firm diversity and inclusion.

True diversity and inclusion in law firms requires more than just creating policies and programs. Law firms and lawyers need to consciously and intentionally foster diversity and inclusion through active strategies like branding, discussion, and setting measurable goals for firm diversity. Tracking and following up on goals is key to shifting D&I from a moral to a business issue. When law firms embrace D&I culture and create a more even playing field, everyone—from lawyers to clients to the industry—wins.

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