

Why Your Firm Should Have Retreats For Minority Attys

By **Lisa Ryan**

Law360, New York (May 11, 2015, 7:49 PM ET) -- With hopes of retaining minority lawyers, several BigLaw firms — including Duane Morris LLP and Mayer Brown LLP — host special retreats for their diverse attorneys to network and discuss inclusion issues.

"There is a great need out in the world for diverse lawyers, and there is a limited pool of talent," said Catherine A. Mohan, a McCarter & English LLP partner and member of the firm's diversity committee. "More and more law firms understand how important it is, and because of that, many of them consider doing retreats as part of their diversity programs."

Here's what your firm could gain by following suit.

Lawyers Form Closer Interoffice Relationships

Top law firms have hundreds — sometimes thousands — of attorneys sprawled in offices across the globe. But even if firms have high percentages of diverse attorneys on staff, these lawyers may be situated in different offices and not have a chance to often interact.

"We have fairly large offices at Duane Morris domestically; some of those offices are small," Duane Morris' Chief Diversity Officer Nolan Atkinson said. "There may be diverse attorneys in one of our small offices who need to get to know other people like them in the firm."

Duane Morris has been hosting its diversity and inclusion retreat for the past nine years, and although professional workshops and panel discussions are always on the books, an emphasis is placed on creating a relaxed atmosphere for minority attorneys to network with their colleagues, Atkinson said.

"This is an opportunity for diverse attorneys to network and socialize with each other, as well as management, in a setting that allows for good, positive discussion and for folks really getting to know each other," Atkinson said.

Mayer Brown, which has been hosting its diversity retreat since 2005, also encourages its diverse attorneys to network with those from other offices. At each of its long-weekend retreats, the attorneys are invited to attend a casual dinner after long days of vital discussions.

"At the dinner, everyone was so enthusiastic about meeting folks from different offices ... people were up until 3 a.m. getting to know each other and talking," said Jerry DeBerry, Mayer Brown's director of

diversity and inclusion.

Kristine McKinney, the director of diversity and inclusion at Faegre Baker Daniels, said her firm's first annual retreat this year was also designed to promote socialization between its diverse attorneys.

"When you're an underrepresented minority, you're more likely to be socially isolated, which is a big driver of people leaving BigLaw," McKinney said.

Associates Get Motivated by Finding New Mentors

Minority associates can be dissuaded by a lack of apparent diversity in the partnership of their offices. But attending diversity and inclusion retreats gives these associates the chance to meet partners at the firm that come from similar backgrounds — and even find new mentors.

"It's important for our associates to see people like them being successful in this arena, and if you're in an office where there's not much diversity, you can be discouraged," DeBerry said. "It is important for our diverse associates to see that long term success at this firm is a possibility if that's something you desire."

DeBerry said he has seen "at least three" mentor relationships grow between associates and Mayer Brown partners who met at the firm's diversity retreats.

The team at McCarter & English, which has been hosting its retreat for the past seven years, has had new ideas for its minority associates — such as a first-year law program specifically for minority lawyers and a diversity mentorship program — come out of its retreat, according to Mohan.

It's important to put such programs into place and to encourage mentorships in order to retain diverse associates, given the tough competition from other firms and corporations seeking out the same minority lawyers.

"It's very competitive out there," Mohan said. "I have had a diverse associate who worked for me for eight years — who clearly would be [promoted to] partner at McCarter & English — plucked out from me to get a great job in-house. It is imperative for law firms to promote diverse associates, since we're competing with our clients who are trying to go after the same pool of candidates."

Everyone Benefits From Frank Talks About Firm Diversity

A key component to these retreats is the participation by firm leadership in vital conversations about the issues that their minority employees face on a day-to-day basis and ways to make the firm feel more inclusive.

Duane Morris views its retreat as an opportunity for management to hear what the firm's diverse attorneys think works and what doesn't necessarily work in the firm, according to Atkinson. He said his firm's leadership in particular makes it a point to attend and participate in panels, discussions and informal conversations.

"We always want to work better," Atkinson said. "It's important for you to be able to show the world that you believe in inclusion, and it's important for business. Companies these days have the same issues, and they raise it with law firms. Clients want diverse lawyers to work on cases."

Mayer Brown's most recent diversity retreat included a discussion that brought a lot of important issues to the leadership's attention, according to DeBerry. It also included a lengthy talk about what companies are looking for when they seek out legal work.

"There were messages that leaders of the firm needed to hear about how important diversity was to our clients and how important it was that we staff their matters with diverse teams," DeBerry said.

And according to Mohan, such discussions are a true win-win situation for firms.

"The diverse lawyers feel like they have a chance to tell management what they like and what they don't like, and we get great ideas," Mohan said. "The retreat is definitely a two-way street for the management of the firm and for the diverse attorneys that attend the retreat."

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg and Kelly Duncan.

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