Intentional Diversity: The Story of a Meaningful Diversity Collaboration

ACHIEVING MEANINGFUL DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION in the legal profession continue to be a long and uphill battle. Organizations serious about advancing the ball find that it requires commitment, time, investment and a strategic approach. For Cummins Inc., the world’s largest independent engine manufacturer and Faegre Baker Daniels LLP, an AM Law 200 law firm with roots dating back to 1863, a joint commitment to diversity and inclusion led to an alliance of equal partnership in learning, growing, and impacting diversity within their organizations and beyond.

This article tells the true story of an active law firm and corporate client’s diversity and inclusion collaboration. It demonstrates that success requires being present together, investing together, and holding each other accountable.

Being Present Together
On a balmy night in July 2014, during the Minority Corporate Counsel Association’s (MCCA) annual Diversity Gala, Sharon Barner, Cummins’ general counsel and Brita Horvath, Faegre’s manager of diversity and inclusion met each other for the first time. Their conversation led to a meeting that falls where they pledged to explore ways, rooted in appreciative approaches, in which their organizations could advance diversity and inclusion efforts collaboratively.

While Cummins and Faegre had worked together for over two decades, the opportunity to impact diversity beyond summer associate recruitment efforts presented a new and exciting adventure.

Before long, Marva Deskins Hamilton and Haroon Anwar, two Faegre attorneys and Sylvia Bier and Karen Weber, two Cummins in-house counsel, were selected to spearhead the effort. Together with Brita and Faegre’s senior client relations staff, the four attorneys met in January 2015 to dream big about the possibilities and opportunities to deepen and enhance diversity and inclusion efforts. Karen recalls that first meeting as “exciting!” The discussion was lively, the ideas robust and freely shared, and the territory new, unchartered and brave—with the team floating around a myriad of ideas—including creating a legal diversity organization in Indianapolis.

The team met monthly, and from those early meetings, identified five key focus areas to explore and expand:

1. Interactive shared learning experiences;
2. Exposure and visibility opportunities;
3. “Know the business” experiences;
4. Partnering on existing programs; and
5. Intentionality to impact retention and advancement of diverse attorneys.

Investing Together
From their five focus areas, the team identified three manageable, impactful, and interactive goals to accomplish within the first 12 months of their collaboration.

A tour of the Cummins Mid-range Engine Plant was the Collaboration’s “know the business” experience. Summer associates and legal interns from both Faegre and Cummins, along with attorneys, participated in a 60-minute tour of an engine plant. The tour provided an excellent learning opportunity for all participants, was a tangible reminder of the essence of Cummins and its business, and an opportunity to observe a client’s operations, environment and workplace culture. For Haroon, whose practice includes products liability, the tour brought to life the careful and precise construction of the engines and enhanced for him the ability to aggressively defend Cummins’ engines and products.

Four months later, the team organized an implicit bias training session that MCCA customized for nearly 50 Cummins and Faegre attorneys and other professionals. The implicit bias training was an interactive session that encouraged introspection, as well as conversation on the biases and prejudices that we all have, but may be unaware of or afraid to acknowledge. The training also highlighted—with data—the impact of biases on the retention and advancement of diverse attorneys. By anonymous evaluations of the session, the session was a success.
and left participants with much food for thought. Overall, participants found the training to be informative, substantive and insightful, and welcomed the opportunity to interact with one another and apply concepts in a shared and stimulating format.

The team is currently working on two Spotlight Continuing Legal Education (CLE) sessions that will “spotlight” the talents, expertise and capabilities of Faegre’s diverse attorneys. The CLEs provide substantive, relevant training for Cummins’ attorneys and are customized for, and responsive to, Cummins’ business and legal needs and risks. Most importantly, the Spotlight CLE showcases diverse attorneys’ skills, experience and expertise while enhancing their development with growth opportunities. The opportunity exposes diverse attorneys to, and strengthens their ties with, an institutional firm client, and hopefully opens the door for more fulfilling work which could deepen their loyalty to their employer, and increase the likelihood that they will be invested in their firms and remain for the long haul. The Spotlight CLE truly creates a “win-win” for all involved.

Holding Each Other Accountable
Lastly, by sharing ideas, taking equal responsibility, and investing time and money into the diversity and inclusion collaboration, Cummins and Faegre hold each other accountable to achieve their goals and make their collaboration a great success. Both organizations encourage each other to reflect on their diversity and inclusion values, priorities, needs, opportunities, and challenges. Hopefully, these efforts will lead to greater impact, more effective results, and a meaningful and sustained improvement in diversity and inclusion in the legal profession.

Tips for Collaborating on Diversity Efforts
Here are some tips for establishing diversity and inclusion collaborations, or similar initiatives, with business partners or stakeholders with whom you share a commitment to diversity and inclusion.

1. Connect with stakeholders on shared diversity and inclusion goals. In order to launch a successful collaboration, it is essential that stakeholders (general counsel, client relationship partner, firm management) be engaged and on board from the outset. Schedule a meeting to gauge interest and determine the organization’s willingness to invest and commit.

2. Enlist a team to lead the effort. Identify individuals in each organization with the passion, time and commitment to advance the effort. Within the law firm, senior to mid-level attorneys who work with the client or partner organization are ideal given that they are already familiar with the client’s business. Enlisting the help of diversity and client relations professionals is also worthwhile as those individuals serve as additional resources and bring varying perspectives and skills that enhance the collaboration.

3. Identify potential frameworks and corresponding ideas. “Think big. No idea is unachievable.” At the team’s first meeting, ideas ranged from partnering on community service projects to instituting a diversity legal organization in Indianapolis.

4. Select and prioritize frameworks. Select and prioritize frameworks to be accomplished within the first 12 to 24 months. Then, reserve a “parking lot” for good ideas that may not be immediate priorities. The commitment to diversity and inclusion is an ongoing effort, and every idea deserves consideration.

5. Track your successes and your failures. There is no point to starting an initiative if there’s no way to evaluate or measure impact and outcome. Think of modules, matrices, and other tools to hold the collaboration team accountable, whether setting certain goals or seeking feedback.

Most of all, if you and/or your organization are committed to fostering intentional and meaningful diversity, do not stay on the sidelines. Take steps. Do something. Remember: “Little drops of water make a mighty ocean!”