
Hughes Hubbard & Reed

Black Attorney Affinity Co-Chair Seeks to Lift Different Voices

News & Events | Diversity

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Nathalie Rey became co-chair of the firm's Black Attorney Affinity Group in the fall of 2020. Born and raised in Queens, New York, Rey has been a member of the firm's Committee for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion since she joined HHR as an associate in December 2018.

Why is diversity and inclusion important to you?

Diversity and inclusion is both a personal and an intellectual passion for me. My own family is like the United Nations. I grew up very proud to be part of a family that had a presence in so many countries, where we all spoke different languages and still managed to communicate with one another, figuring out how to express ourselves and listen to the other and love each other. A child of immigrants who did not fit into traditional groups, I was very aware of how race, culture and identity determined whether or not someone had a voice, or what kinds of opportunities they had available to them.

My personal experiences translated into studying international politics, human rights and economic development and I kept coming back to the role of race, gender, religion or ethnicity and the politics of identity to maintain inequity and oppression around the world. Besides the Skip Gateses and Edward Saids of the post-colonial, identity politics world, I was exposed to writings of Karl Popper and ended up working for one of his disciples, George Soros, in one of his Open Society Foundations. His focus on transforming post-totalitarian societies into democracies was based on giving voice to those who previously were not allowed to think independently and privileging the exchange and sharing of ideas to build a civil society. The greater the diversity of ideas in science, culture, philosophy, the economy, the greater the chance of finding the best solutions for society's problems. Why couldn't this same principle work in the context of identity? Manipulating identity to create haves and have nots leads to violence and decline. Appreciating difference and promoting inclusiveness leads to critical thinking, which leads to breakthroughs, equity and success.

For me, diversity and inclusion is not just a respect for difference, but a passion for it. The way to find the best answers to any problem in any place (personal or public) is by being open and listening to different voices. The

way to hear those voices is by making sure each collective forum actively seeks out those voices and is a place that is safe to speak your mind and be who you are, wherever you are from.

What challenges have you faced as a diverse lawyer and how did you overcome them?

As you can tell, I had a life before coming to the law. Even after becoming a lawyer, I diverted from the traditional path, leaving private practice to enter public service and then coming back to private practice. That doesn't even take into account being a woman of color. I think the biggest challenge I have faced includes my knowing that I am different (older associate, woman, racially ambiguous) and assuming that I am observed as different and that attorneys in a law firm do not know or care to know what benefits or knowledge could come from someone who does not come from the typical mold, other than ticking a box. The responsibility of inclusion is a two-way street and growing up a child of immigrants, we did not ask for help. We were taught to keep pushing to excel and that any failure was on us. This breeds insularity when in fact, people who are part of the majority seek help and guidance all the time. So it is a daily challenge for me to tell myself to ask for help and not be intimidated, even with all my life experience (or because of it). But I want to be clear to say, it is not all on me – the context of law firm life, and HHR is no exception, does not yet create that space.

Why did you get involved with the Diversity Committee and take on a leadership role?

I joined the Diversity Committee because I wanted to find community and work with a group towards my ideal of creating an environment that promotes inclusion so that I (and everyone else) can feel safe enough to be myself, ask questions, and pursue my interests. It's a bit of a social experiment.

What's the best way for a law firm to not only increase the number of diverse lawyers, but also retain them?

First, measure. If you don't look, you don't know. I was a fellow in a federal leadership program and taking a scientific approach to any goal is the only way to achieve success. So I am immediately skeptical if a workplace says it cares about diversity, but does not know or track its employees. Being color blind is not a solution, it just maintains the status quo, which, I hope we all agree, is a problem and chases people away. You may know who is coming in the door, but do you know who is leaving? Are you measuring the rate at which members of different groups leave and why? How many diverse attorneys land in the various departments? Do there appear to be barriers to entry? How many people of color or women or LBGQTQ are partners or other leadership roles, or heads of departments? Is there pay equity?

So, measurement is key. Measurement shows you care, which is a key signal to diverse attorneys that it is worth sticking around. When you have the data, investigate the conditions, look for patterns. Are there hostile people or just complaisance? Be honest with the results and try to rectify the conditions. Attorneys are generally risk averse people. Take that and multiply by two or three for diverse attorneys. We look at the signals for potential success of diverse people in a given workplace, we survive or listen to the anecdotes, and we make an assessment as to whether this is a safe space for ourselves and our families long-term.

Second, as I stated above, is building an inclusive workspace. One of the markers of a high performing work place is whether people are excited to be there. What makes people excited to come to work every day? Maybe the mission. But that can take you only so far, as I have seen many a mission-driven organization take advantage of its employees and treat them horribly. To be excited to come to work and stay there comes from feeling valued and being heard. Partners, take the time to get to know your associates, think about their development, their range of experience, and last but not least, their health, happiness and well-being.

But if you really want to succeed here, take inclusion to heart. Think about what it means in your own daily life--in your personal relationships, your work relationships (your colleagues and subordinates), just interacting with

anyone. Then ask yourself, if I really want to make a difference, what could I do as a decisionmaker to ensure success and make this firm a model? Would I ask for help from a professional? Would I create dialogue at every level? Would I include attorneys and staff? How far would I go to make an engaged, diverse and inclusive work environment a reality?

What are your short-term and long-term goals for the group?

For the Black Attorneys Group, I would love for us to get to a place where we have advocated for all of the above, the measurement, the attention and building a truly inclusive environment. Short-term, I hope that together, we can build up our community with the same inclusive mindset (because we are all different), give ourselves the space to breathe, be open and communicate with everything that has gone on around us in 2020, and move ahead with excitement and joy.

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Nathalie Rey