

Ally and Affinity Groups: Helping to Bring Our True Selves to Work

BY EILEEN WUBBE

Industry ally and affinity group members and leaders share their stories and discuss how their organization's groups began and their benefits.

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**Christy Bowen, senior vice president,
Bank of America**

Can you provide some background on how you became involved with Bank of America's Ally Groups and what is involved in that role?

Bowen: I've been involved in a few employee groups of the bank, primarily supporting women and LGBTQ+ initiatives, and am active in community volunteer groups. There are 11 different ally groups at Bank of America, with more than 280 chapters made up of more than 140,000 memberships worldwide. I am most actively involved in LEAD for Women group and the LGBTQ+ Pride group, and I serve as the Membership chair for the Philadelphia chapter of LEAD for Women (which stands for Leadership, Education, Advocacy, and Development).

To give you a little history, I stumbled upon an article on the Bank of America internal home page, regarding what's now the LGBTQ+ Pride group, which resonated with me. As a married lesbian hopeful for children, it was exciting. I never really felt support or any level of connection on that front. Needless to say, I read about the group, learned more, instantly joined and I have been a proud member for the past decade.

Being in Philadelphia you would think we'd have our own chapter; however, Bank of America's office presence in Philadelphia is a little smaller than some of the Bank's offices in surrounding areas. Being so close to Wilmington, I joined a chapter out of our Delaware office, which is not that far from here. Over the years I've been involved with them, in person and virtually. There are general monthly meetings where various topics are discussed. Sometimes outside speakers come in and talk on a variety of relevant topics. The group volunteers often to support the LGBTQ+ community in the greater Philadelphia area. One of my favorite events was at the William Way Center several years back. I have also been involved in both the Philadelphia and the New Jersey pride parades and festivals. There is a special sense of pride in representing the Bank and supporting the LGBTQ+ community with this group.

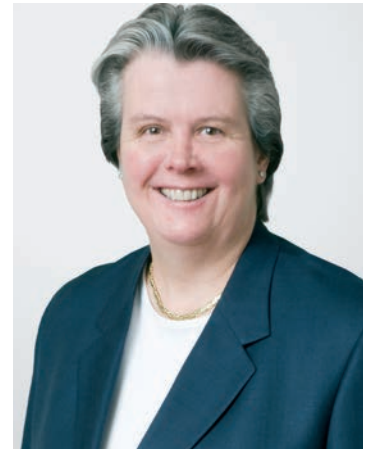
The LEAD group's Philadelphia Chapter was formed around 2016. I joined immediately and took on the Membership chair role. Our chapter had started with five members and has grown to over 300. It's a group dedicated to connecting, developing and elevating women to help them make meaningful contributions within the Bank and our communities. We do a lot of team building and volunteer activities, with occasional guest speaker events.

What is the time commitment for participating in the groups?

Bowen: It varies, but if you're on the board or in a leadership role, you're generally going to put more time than a general member. Board members generally have monthly or



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bimonthly meetings to discuss upcoming events and outreach opportunities to engage employees who may not be aware of our group. We generally host quarterly events with additional volunteer opportunities. Occasionally our group will partner with other employee networks to host joint events and volunteer opportunities.

On the member side, for the LGBTQ+ group, there are monthly chapter meetings, during which different topics are casually discussed. A lot of the time it's an open forum for members to bring up current events or ask advice of other members about certain situations.

The good thing about these groups is you can be as involved as you want or are able. If you have more time to dedicate, there's always something to be done. The groups are here to supplement your overall work experience, and that's exactly how they work for me. It never feels like a chore; it's always something I look forward to doing.

How has being involved in these groups shaped your overall work experience?

Bowen: I value my colleagues' differences just as much, if not more, than I value my own - whether it's age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religion. There's so much insight that comes from everybody's individual story and who they are. I feel like being a part of a bank that is abundantly supportive of diversity inclusion, day in and day out, is so important. I think without these opportunities, there could be a huge void, but I've never felt that way. There is always support across the board and that plays a huge part in my day in and day out at Bank of America.

At the end of the day, it helps in bringing one's whole self to work rather than compartmentalizing and leaving some aspects at the door. If you have the ability to sit and talk with somebody else in a similar situation, or network or volunteer with someone with whom you relate and share common interests, you form these connections. Building these types of

relationships enhances your career and life. I feel if you are more vested through and through, you're less likely to leave untapped potential on the table. What I have noticed is that when I can be fully me, I am able to do my job better from client service to being the best colleague I can be.

Joshua Griffin, associate director of sales, Large Bank, Wolters Kluwer - Financial Services Solutions

Please explain a little bit about your role at Wolters Kluwer (WK).

Joshua Griffin: I've been at Wolters Kluwer for 15 years and have had the pleasure to serve in different divisions. I started my career in the Tax and Accounting division and then moved over to the Lien Solutions business and now I am part of the Compliance Solutions business.

I'm the associate director of Sales for our large bank segment. My team represents a sales force that's selling Wolters Kluwer banking compliance solutions, that ensure financial institutions stay within regulation throughout the loan lifecycle.

I'm based in Columbia, South Carolina, and I'm a member of the LGBTQ+ community, specifically the G. I have two daughters, a nine-year-old and an almost three-year-old. I had an interesting story as part of the community; I was involved in the first joint same-sex adoption in South Carolina history.

My spouse at the time, and I, were the first to challenge some laws in South Carolina, and we're lucky enough to not have significant issues through the court system in getting that done. So, that was exciting. Later on, I adopted my older daughter's biological sister when she was born. So, I ended up with two little gorgeous ladies that I absolutely love and that my world revolves around.

From your perspective, what is an ally group?

Griffin: There's a difference between tolerance and acceptance, and I think historically speaking there are a lot



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of people who felt tolerated, but didn't feel accepted. I think there's a shift when you get to that place where you feel accepted for the performance that you're able to put forth for your organization versus just being tolerated.

I think an ally group goes beyond saying, 'Oh, well, there's a group of marginalized people that have something in common, let's put them together and allow them to network.' An ally group allows those who support and accept that community to then be put together, and for those who are part of that marginalized group to see that there are people who accept them. When you have acceptance, you're happier. When you're happier in life and you're in a better mindset, you perform better in all ways, whether it's personally or professionally.

Wolters Kluwer Pride Network is open to members of the community and allies.

We have an open communication channel where there's constant communication, whether it's posting pictures of people's kids, Pride events, marriages, all of those things. But, in addition to that, Wolters Kluwer specifically brings in external speakers, develops content and training courses and things that can be used by the employees to not only help them feel more accepted in the organization but also empower other employees to support others that are a part of a marginalized group.

For example, during Pride Month, we brought in a guest speaker who spoke to everyone at Wolters Kluwer that wanted to attend, about being your authentic

self at work, and it was specifically about LGBTQ+. That's something that a lot of people in the community struggle with. Let's say you and your partner went on a vacation, and you have to think twice if you talk about the trip you went on or about using their name or saying their gender because you're concerned about what people might think. So, that session was about how to overcome those obstacles and how to support others to feel comfortable to bring their authentic self to work as well. It also focused on the benefits of that, personally to the individuals and collectively for the organization.



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There's an ongoing DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging) Initiative in Wolters Kluwer and the Pride Network is a component of that. We also have a women's network, and recently launched the new multicultural network. From an employee perspective, it's very impactful for me. I made it a point when I started at Wolters Kluwer that hell or high water I was just going to be out and be my authentic self. At the company I worked for before I hid myself, and Wolters Kluwer has been exceptionally open and accepting of not only myself but my children. It's been an amazing experience.

How did Wolters Kluwer get the Pride Network started?

Griffin: As part of the company's overall DEIB strategy, Wolters Kluwer launched two new employee networks last year:

Pride and Women. The company identified an executive sponsor and an executive chairperson to lead the network. They then sent a volunteer form out to all employees asking if they would want to be a part of the network and solicited volunteers.

Once the executive chair received all of the survey feedback, he partnered with our HR team to start up the network and identify a small group of leaders we call Pillar Leaders, to help drive specific aspects of the network. Using the talents of those individuals, we started to build out our content, resources, and all the things that make up the Pride Network, and then we rolled it out from corporate down with a really detailed, and well

thought-out communication plan from our marketing and PR team that touched employees in a variety of different ways to explain what the group was for and how you can join.

So, it started with awesome senior leadership as well as our DEIB Steering Committee (a group of senior leaders throughout the company who come together on a regular basis to help drive inclusion throughout the company). We started with calls at the end of 2022, and spent four months working to build out plans and then we rolled out the official Pride

Network in early 2023.

In less than the year since the Pride Network launched, we have seen continued growth. We are working aggressively to expand the offerings that we provide to the members. We're excited about that and our plans to continue the enrichment of members and allies involved with the group.

One of the really cool things about Wolters Kluwer, is that Wolters Kluwer has been recognized for the amount of female leadership that we have, which is significantly higher than industry norms. We even have a female CEO! I am also really proud that I have many role models in leadership that identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. We are lucky because we have a diverse leadership in every aspect, whether it's gender, culture or sexual orientation.

I think that's one of the reasons why we've been such a successful organization because we bring forward a lot of different ideas and can be innovative. When you have folks from different walks of life, collectively, they're going to come up with a diverse set of thoughts.

This organization has gone out of its way for me. For example, when I adopted my older child, Hadley, she was about a week and a half old, and so we had temporary placement from the courts, and we had started the process to get her on my health insurance. I was in our Chicago office with senior leadership, and she had a minor emergency back home. My spouse at the time took her for medical care, and there were issues with the insurance. At the time, I happened to be there with two of my VPs, and it was late at night, we had just come back from a dinner event, and to see them sitting on a curb outside of a hotel on their cellphones, calling people in HR and calling other executives, to call people at Blue Cross/Blue Shield to make sure my kiddo was able to get the healthcare that she needed, I think that was the moment it really hit me that I'm going to

be a Wolters Kluwer employee for as long as they'll have me because I saw how much they went out of their way for me that night when truly that was my issue to figure out.

How can employees become involved in Employee Networks, including the Pride Network, at Wolters Kluwer?

Griffin: Wolters Kluwer includes a lot of information about our employee networks, whether it's the women's network, Pride network and now the newly launched Multicultural Network. There are various communications that come out from corporate from a high level, but there's also communications that are distributed from the division level or subdivision level

to let employees know that these groups are available. The company is also sharing information about the networks to all of our new hires. We even have a dedicated DEIB page, and each network has their own SharePoint and Teams sites.

Once an employee decides to join a group, we break the group up into pillars that have different functional areas, and the employee can volunteer to help in an area. We do continuous ongoing feedback, to get suggestions to always improve and see how we can serve employees even better. So, there are a lot of different ways to get involved and you can be as involved as you would like.

I once hosted a roundtable about being your authentic self with a handful of employees. One of the employees who came to the roundtable session was someone

who had never been out at work before, and it was the first time they had ever done anything in the workplace that was related to LGBTQ+. Given the things that we're doing around Pride and the Pride Network, that gave them the courage and bravery to really step outside of their comfort zone and take a step toward being their authentic self and put themselves out there.



It depends on whatever the focus is of each group. For instance, our African American/ Black affinity group is working on increasing the pipeline, looking at attracting and retaining and promoting top talent and interns. It could be creating a pipeline program working with law schools in the communities in which we have office locations or revisiting our scholarship opportunities and other ways that we can share the information to increase the numbers of students that program is reaching.

Norma Jackson, chief diversity and attorney development officer, Thompson Coburn

Please explain more about your role at Thompson Coburn.

Jackson: I'm the firm's chief diversity and attorney development officer. In my role I'm responsible for firmwide diversity efforts for all of our attorneys, paralegals, staff members, and lead professional development for our attorneys.

The majority of our attorneys that participate in the Firm's various affinity groups do identify as members of the respective group; however, our affinity groups are open to any attorneys in the Firm. The groups are not restricted to individuals that identify as members; allies are welcome as well.

What would you say are some of the benefits Thompson Coburn attorneys and professionals see in joining these affinity groups? How does it help them professionally and personally?

Jackson: Our attorney groups contribute to the firm's success through recruitment and retention efforts, formal and informal training and mentoring, as well as by providing networking opportunities for our attorneys. Professional and business development opportunities occur through our affinity groups, and the groups also create a positive and supportive work environment. The groups also are involved in various outreach efforts to give back to their communities. I am grateful for these groups, as they assist in delivering our commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, internally and externally.

Do you have any examples of what the community outreach events are?

Jackson: It depends on whatever the focus is of each group. For instance, our African American/Black affinity group is working on increasing the pipeline, looking at attracting and retaining and promoting top talent and interns. It could be creating a pipeline program working with law schools in the communities in which we have office locations or revisiting our scholarship opportunities and other ways that we can share the information to increase the numbers of students that program is reaching. The Firm's scholarship offering is open to all, and the group is making sure to share the word about the opportunity. So that group really focuses on that recruitment aspect.

Our Asian and South Asian affinity group does a lot of outreach with law schools as well. They work closely with affinity groups at law schools, putting on presentations. The presentations are open to any student who would want to attend, but the lawyers do volunteer their time to go out into the community to build those relationships with the law schools as well.

I had read on the Thompson Coburn website that one of the groups started in 2005?

Jackson: Our diversity committee started in 2005, and the affinity groups came after. When I came on board in 2018, I worked to revamp the groups and ensure they are attorney-led. I'm the firm's only dedicated DEI professional. Our attorneys coordinate the efforts of the affinity groups. Of course, I'm there for support, but they are truly, whatever the initiative, whether it's programming, networking or outreach, is driven by our attorneys.

What's a typical day like for you as a Chief Diversity & Attorney Development Officer?

Jackson: I'd say not one day is the same. I'm responsible for any type of firm sponsorship, outreach, or initiatives that are DEI-related. My role tends to be very project-based. For instance, we just had, and this is not from a DEI lens but for professionals as well, an associates and counsel retreat. So, I worked with various departments across the firm on what that programming looks like. I worked with our Management Committee members, business development team, human resources, our events staff and business office team members to bring this effort to fruition.

What would you say are some future goals for the firm's affinity groups?

Jackson: We're always looking at additional groups and ways to change the existing structures. Our African American and Hispanic/Latinx groups had previously met, and there was a smaller number of Hispanic attorneys some years ago that never had grown since then. The attorneys appreciated being able to get mentored and shadow our African American affinity group, which is one of our larger groups. Starting this year, our Hispanic/ Latinx attorneys will be branching off and forming their own affinity group. A partner in our Chicago office, Carlos Ortiz, has assumed the leadership role.

It's really each year taking a look at the structure and asking if anything needs to change, does it make sense and is it working the way we want it to. The Diversity Committee co-chairs and I are meeting with our affinity group leaders on a regular basis. We are reviewing the mission, goals, and strategic objectives each group wants to accomplish this year.

Our affinity groups ensure the firm has an inclusive environment where all of our attorneys feel valued and included and are empowered to succeed. Our groups are not designed only for people who fit within a particular identity. We're very proud of the fact the affinity groups are open to any and all team members.

During the pandemic, we started a Working Parent Affinity Group. It is a larger group that meets quarterly and puts on programming that not only talks to our working parents, but also those with aging parents. They bring in outside speakers and tap into our internal resources. That group has been

successful in their efforts. But we're always looking to see if there is a need to create a group.

Most recently, we established a Muslim and Arab affinity group.

For someone reading this and looking to start an affinity or ally group, what are the first steps in forming one?

Jackson: First, determine what your needs are — which affinity groups you have in your organization. The next step is to have conversations with management, as the top-down buy-in is key to the success of your groups. We communicated with our Management Committee, and they felt there was a need for our affinity groups and continue to support them. Again, being able to have the buy-in and support at all levels is essential.

Dianne R. Phillips, partner, Holland & Knight

Please provide some background on your career.

Phillips: I'm an attorney in Holland & Knight's Boston office and concentrate my practice in litigation, environmental, regulatory and energy law. I've been practicing law since 1988. I've been a firm leader in the DEI space for more than two decades. I'm part of the firm-wide Diversity Council, which is responsible for leading the firm's diversity and inclusion strategy and initiatives and is made up of our affinity group chairs and co-chairs. I'm co-chair of the LGBTQ Affinity Group. I was part of the impetus for a lot of the work we've done at Holland & Knight on LGBTQ rights. I live in Massachusetts, so this year marks my 20th legal wedding anniversary, and I gave birth to our son in 1995.

I've been a DEI advocate for most of my career. Along with being an environmental practitioner, I was the on the board of GLAD and went to the U.S. Supreme Court twice, once to watch *United States v. Windsor* case and the Proposition 8 case, and once when Mary Bonauto, the lawyer from GLAD, was arguing the *Obergefell* case. I was president of the board of directors

of GLAD at that time. It was exciting.

Our local offices each have Diversity Committees as well, and I helped create that structure back when the firm I was with, Sherburne, Powers & Needham, P.C., which merged with Holland & Knight in 1998.

What ally or affinity groups does Holland & Knight offer? Can you explain more about Holland & Knight's LGBTQ Affinity Group?

Phillips: We currently have nine firm-wide affinity groups: Asian/Pacific Islander, or API; Black; DiverseAbility, which is colleagues with disabilities and those who support them; Hispanic; the LGBTQ affinity group I mentioned; Middle Eastern/North African (MENA); Native American; Veterans, and then we have a firmwide Women's Initiative.

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some of them are open to all employees and some are open just to lawyers because of the way our legal practice is structured. But they really are a safe space for folks to brainstorm, to market, to raise issues in the firm and to advocate positions.

The LGBTQ affinity group really was instrumental in seeking and obtaining numerous policy changes over the years. We were one of the first firms to offer domestic partner benefits for same-sex couples. The firm leadership didn't think that up themselves. People like us asked for it. In early 2014 we were one of the first firms to offer full transgender health coverage. We have transition guidelines for employees who are

transgender. We had COBRA benefits back before those were widely available.

All the affinity groups engage in educational and ally-building activities, either separately or together. We're really focusing more this year on intersectionality. We've done joint programs, some in an office, and others firmwide, bringing in outside speakers. It's designed to create an inclusive environment for all employees to feel like they can bring their

whole selves to work.

In a hierarchical organization like a law firm, the affinity groups and diversity committees in the local offices are where all employees can be leaders. So, you don't have to be a partner or a lawyer to be a leader in this space, and that makes it fun and interesting. The firm provides budgets to both affinity groups and offices to put on programming, bring in outside speakers and trainers and have potluck meals. It's part of how we build awareness and alliances, and a lot of our programming is recorded and available so when new employees come in, they can watch it on our internal portal.

We also have DEI creditable hours, like pro bono hours. So, all timekeepers can spend a certain amount of time every year and have it compensated as if it were client paid which goes into calculating for partners' and associates' compensation and bonuses. We want to encourage participation.

Otherwise, what you will find is the work of building an inclusive workplace or emphasizing diversity, equity, and inclusion, often falls on those people who were historically disenfranchised to educate others, and we want to encourage everybody to be a leader in this space. We're all on a journey together, and I think we've done a pretty good job. It's not perfect by any means, but we've come a long way in the number of years since I've joined the firm.

When did the groups form and how did they get up and running?

Phillips: Each group started differently. The LGBTQ Affinity Group that I'm most familiar with began as a grassroots effort in 1998. The DiverseAbility Affinity Group is one of our most recent and was established in 2021. So, they usually are a core group of colleagues that get together to fulfill a need. They jointly decide what they would like to focus on, whether it's supporting each other, educating others, or developing marketing opportunities.

The groups vary in size. Our Native American group is one of the smallest with less than 20 members, while our Hispanic group has over 150 members.

What would you say these affinity groups offer employees?

Phillips: A sense of belonging and an opportunity to be a leader and to bring your whole self to work. I think all the data shows that people who are purpose-driven are the most productive. It really is good business sense, too, because it increases productivity for everybody.

People can self-identify and join when they join the firm. We like to welcome them when they join, and I usually have a one-on-one Zoom or call with new members, or my co-chair does and we'll have a DEI orientation for all new lawyers who join in Boston about what the firm offers. We're also thinking about ways we can improve and support our colleagues.

In what ways do affinity groups increase awareness and build alliances?

Phillips: We do a lot of educational programming throughout the year. We celebrate all the heritage months and holidays and acknowledge them. We have a series of video programs where individuals have recorded messages that are shared outside the firm as well as internally about their identities and how they've come to the world and come to the workplace. The LGBTQ affinity group has done this during Pride Month. We found that by sharing personal stories about where we are and where we've been really helps collectively bring the journey along.

We have had some intersectional programs during Pride Month and for Juneteenth. We had a watch party together for The 1619 Project video series, which is an ongoing initiative from *The New York Times Magazine* that began in August 2019, the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. We also collectively took a walk to The Embrace statue in Boston Common, which is the Martin Luther King memorial here, and went to look at the portraits of Pride presentation that was part of the City of Boston's recognition of significant LGBTQ leaders in Boston. It really is as simple as collecting, taking a walk together, having conversations, and sharing a meal often.

Law is an interesting profession. Because of pro bono and public service and the nature of the profession, we view diversity efforts similarly as part of our responsibility in the profession.

Bernardo (Bernie) Ramos, Commercial Banking - Hispanic Segment Leader, Wells Fargo

Please provide some background on your career.

Ramos: I grew up in Brooklyn and went to school at the University at Buffalo. I started out in public accounting, but migrated to banking when I realized public accounting wasn't exactly for me. I held several positions in banking before I ended up in commercial banking and I've been at Wells Fargo now for more than 16 years. Over that time, I've taken on increasing levels of responsibility and last March I took on my latest role, becoming the Hispanic Segment leader in our Diverse Segments business. My focus now is to oversee the commercial banking relationships with Hispanic and Latino entrepreneurs and business owners and develop solutions to help them achieve their financial objectives.

Can you explain more about the affinity groups you are involved with at Wells Fargo?

Ramos: Wells Fargo has 10 Employee Resource Networks, or ERNs, that are open to all employees and support an inclusive workplace. I started to get involved with the ERNs back in 2018 and am a member of several of them, including the Hispanic & Latino Connection, Generation Connection, Veterans' Connection, and Black & African American Connection.

Within the Hispanic & Latino Connection ERN, my involvement started locally in the New York chapter. I helped to facilitate events, spoke on panels, served as an executive sponsor and advisor, and helped mentor younger talent. Eventually I joined the enterprise board in a leadership role helping to launch a mentorship program, coordinate activities around Hispanic Heritage Month, and coordinate the activities of the 50 or so chapters across the organization.

My involvement in the ERNs has been incredibly rewarding for me personally. Sharing the experiences that I went through in my own career and thinking about how I can help others to not make some of the same mistakes or take better advantage of the opportunities that they're presented is truly a passion of mine.

You mentioned giving advice to newer entrants into the industry or college graduates. Can you give any example of some of the lessons that you've learned along the way or advice for people early in their career?

Ramos: From a Hispanic cultural perspective, we tend to be a bit quieter, maybe not as forceful, or we have more moderate expectations. And there are a lot of reasons for that behavior. Acknowledging the value we bring to a company or a role is something I find we don't always do well. It is a conversation I have very regularly with folks that are earlier in their careers, especially from a Hispanic perspective.

I encourage those I mentor to be assertive and ask about career opportunities, to ask where they stand and what it's going to take for them to get to the next level, as opposed to merely just thinking about it and hoping that somebody's going to find or give an opportunity to you.

When the lightbulb goes off and they understand that they own their career and the steps to take to establish that ownership, and to set expectations with their leaders and those they work with, that is my goal.



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What would you say for someone reading this that works at Wells Fargo that may want to get involved in any of the ERNs available?

Ramos: I would say that it's an incredible opportunity that everyone should take advantage of. Really any opportunity to create connections with colleagues in a company the size of Wells Fargo is so important. Beyond making connections, the ERNs also focus on advocacy, allyship, and awareness. For example, you don't have to identify with a community to be a member. And outside of the ones I'm a member of, we have an Asian Connection, Disability Connection, Native Peoples Connection, Middle East Connection, Pride Connection, and Women's Connection. Join one, a few, or them all!

Joshua Stewart, SVP, head of Talent Acquisition and Outreach, PNC Financial Services

What Ally groups does PNC offer?

Stewart: At PNC, we have 13 Employee Business Resource Groups (EBRG), each having many chapters across the PNC footprint. By design, every EBRG is open to any employee who wants to join. This includes employees who identify as part of the EBRGs focus area, but also those employees who are their allies. Men As Allies at PNC is slightly different than our EBRGs; it is a six-week, voluntary structured learning and development experience, that works to accelerate the work of allies across the company. As of now, this program focuses primarily on allyship as it relates to gender, but many of the principles

and models it explores can be applied broadly.

In 2018, PNC partnered with Forté, an organization dedicated to launching women into significant, meaningful careers, to develop Men As Allies, a learning and mentorship program designed to elevate women in the workplace. Men As Allies helps men at PNC understand the barriers that challenge their women colleagues and learn the behaviors of allyship.

Since it was founded in 2018, how has the Men as Allies group evolved?

Stewart: Since the pilots in 2018, there have been a number of changes to the program.

- We've refined the target audience for the program to be made up of mostly people managers.
- We've scaled the program significantly and now reach nearly 100 participants every year.
- We've added a few new learning elements to enhance the learning; this includes robust discussions on intersectionality and a module focused on participants' emotional intelligence.

In 2020, the pandemic required us to reformat the program to a 100% virtual format. Despite initial concerns that a virtual experience would stifle meaningful discussions, the opposite has proven true. Through a careful and intentional redesign, the voluntary program remains highly interactive and can now reach more participants than ever before due in part to the more accessible format.

What has the group uncovered as far as challenges, barriers and biases that women sometimes face in the workplace?

Stewart: One of the most difficult "ah-has" is learning that there is no short-list of the challenges, barriers and biases that women may face, and the subsequent actions participants might take as an ally. Through the program, we provide access to the Ally Empowerment model that allows them to respond to both systemic and situational allyship opportunities. What results is an individualized action plan for every participant. Actions range from inspection of the diversity of personal and professional networks, to asking for direct feedback from women colleagues, to more intentional participation or leadership in our women's EBRG, and many more.

It's also important to note what it isn't. This program is not a program to correct poor behaviors. It's not about fixing, saving or suggesting in any way that women require men to be successful. That's not what allyship is, and not what the program is about. It is, though, a program to uncover the real challenges, barriers and biases that women face, including those specific to women of color, women with disabilities, LGBTQ+ women, and so many other intersectional identities. To truly be an ally, one needs to be able to identify inequities and then be intentional in partnering with women to push through those challenges when and if they're called upon.

It's also not only about taking action when something is wrong, but maybe more importantly, learning to celebrate and elevate the accomplishments of PNC women every day.

Can you give an example of the process of building self-awareness during the six-week learning and development experience?

Stewart: A few things come to mind:

- Participants complete an Emotional Intelligence Assessment prior to the first session of the program.
- Participants are given "homework" to interview 3+ women in their lives about the impacts of gender at home and at work. Participants also ask these women about their expectations for the participants' experience in the program.
- There are a number of exercises that ask the male participants to reflect on how their current "gender lens" was created. Here we explore how participants view gender and how they arrived at these views. Maybe it was an influential woman in their lives growing up – a sister, mother etc. Maybe they have a daughter, maybe it's something completely different.

How does accountability work for those who finish the 6-week program?

Stewart: In addition to the personalized action plan that each participant completes, each participant is paired with the executive in their line of business who serves as part of our allyship steering team. These executives provide guidance and support, as appropriate, and help ensure the participants have the resources they need to get the most out of the program. Finally, participants have ongoing access to a community of program alumni where they can continue to share successes and challenges in their allyship journey.

For someone reading this article whose organization doesn't offer many resources for diversity and inclusion, what would you say is the first step in creating something?

Stewart: My first recommendation to organizations new to their D&I journey is to first agree on what D&I means to them. A definition of D&I that's rooted in the business outcomes and core values of your organization is a critical first step. 📌

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