



IT TAKES A COMMUNITY: FOUNDATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR WOMEN'S, FLEX, AND OTHER AFFINITY GROUPS

Establishing affinity groups can be an excellent way to build a community and effectively address the social isolation that interrupts the career advancement of professionals from underrepresented identities including those who work flexibly. Positioning these groups for success requires consideration of several different factors and ensuring they serve the following three main purposes.

1. **Fellowship.** Coming together around shared identities, interests, and/or experiences is what drives the creation of most affinity groups. These groups provide a focal point for employees of a shared affinity, as well as a safe space to address challenges and unite around opportunities uniquely suited to advance their careers. While it's ideal to form these groups where individuals can meet face-to-face on a regular basis, often times there's not sufficient critical mass to do so in an individual office. In that event, think about having organization-wide affinity groups. The organization can support the fellowship function of these groups by providing virtual platforms for meetings, presentations, and periodic in-person events in conjunction with, or separate from, organizational meetings and retreats.

While affinity groups focus on a shared identity or experience, many affinity groups include individuals who do not have the identity but actively support the group's focus. Allies can be included in particular activities and projects, as well as membership, with consideration for the organization's inclusion objectives and compliance with employment laws. As part of affinity group ground rules, which should be established and regularly communicated, it's important to ensure that all voices are heard, but no one person, particularly allies of majority identities (e.g., male allies who are part of women's affinity groups), dominate a discussion or group agenda.

2. **Development.** Affinity groups are an ideal venue to provide professional development training and education geared toward supporting the advancement of underrepresented groups in an organization. Having said this, it's important that organizations do not dictate the topics covered or have a remedial approach. Instead, they can *and* should ask – through formal means such as surveys and in informal ways – what types of development opportunities the affinity group members are interested in having. The organization can provide financial and other resources to support those opportunities. Affinity groups can also look to their own membership to help meet developmental objectives, including designating senior executives as champions, inviting them to share

and model experiences, and serve as mentors and sponsors.

As part of the development objective, it's important for affinity groups' initiatives to reflect the diverse needs that exist within the group. For instance, while women's affinity groups should include women from a variety of backgrounds and levels, their initiatives should reflect the fact that women of color and LGBT women have unique realities that are distinct from women of majority backgrounds.

3. **Measurement.** Affinity groups can also serve the important function of monitoring the progress of under-represented groups in the organization. Not only is this important for members of the groups, but also for the organization to be aware of areas that need to be addressed, and/or ways in which the affinity group can help advance the business, including introducing it to new markets. This mutually beneficial relationship is what pushes affinity groups into the additional function of an employee resource group.

Organizations can heighten visibility for these groups by creating channels for them to report to leadership at regular intervals. This includes communicating about their projects, voicing their concerns and ideas for solutions, and sharing ways in which they benefit the organization. This reporting function can also provide an excellent leadership opportunity for affinity group members to get exposure to a wider audience than the individuals on her or his immediate team.

These are just some of the foundational considerations as your organization establishes affinity groups for flex and other under-represented employees. [Contact us](#) for more information on these and other issues, such as how to survey for interest in establishing or joining a group, or how to evolve an existing affinity group.