



PURPOSE & PLANNING IN AFFINITY GROUPS

Most affinity groups begin with genuine energy and care. People show up because they want to connect, support one another, and help create a more inclusive workplace. Over time, though, that early momentum can start to fade as leaders change, participation ebbs and flows, and expectations change. What once felt organic can begin to feel heavy or unclear.

The challenge is rarely a lack of commitment. More often, it's a lack of shared clarity around purpose, planning, and implementation.

This Action Step offers a practical way to re-anchor affinity groups in what matters most. It also provides tools for clarifying roles at the individual, group, and organizational levels, while designing structure in a way that strengthens community rather than constraining it.

When affinity groups are built with purpose, they become spaces where people feel connected, supported, and empowered to contribute.

The 3 Points of Purpose Framework

Affinity groups thrive when they stay grounded in three core areas:

Connection

This is the foundation. Connection creates space for people to build relationships, share stories, and feel less alone inside the organization. It happens through conversation, reflection, and intentional relationship-building across roles and levels. Especially in hybrid or distributed environments, protecting time for connection is essential.

Cultivation

Cultivation is how belonging and psychological safety are developed over time. It shows up in how meetings are facilitated, whose voices are centered, and how differences are held. This is the quieter work of building trust and curiosity. When cultivation is present, people engage more fully. When it is missing, participation drops off.

Championing

Championing is how groups elevate insights and accomplishments outward into the organization. This might look like sharing themes with leadership, highlighting member contributions, surfacing barriers, or participating as a focus group when invited. Championing allows affinity groups to influence without carrying responsibility for organizational change.

These three pillars help leaders set healthy boundaries. Affinity groups inform change, but they are not responsible for implementing policy or fixing systemic issues alone.

Clarify Roles at Three Levels: Me, We, Us

Strong affinity groups are built on cycles of giving and receiving at three levels:

1. *Me (Individual)*

Each member reflects on what they bring to the group and what they hope to receive. This creates shared ownership instead of passive participation.

2. *We (Group)*

The group collectively defines how they want to show up for one another. What kind of community are you building together?

3. *Us (Organization)*

This is where expectations are clarified between the group and the organization. What insights will flow upward? What support flows back? This clarity prevents leaders from carrying work that belongs elsewhere.

Co-Create the Structure

Whenever the structure of an affinity group changes, some people may feel like something is being taken away. That's normal.

The most effective approach is to invite leaders into co-creation:

- What do these changes make possible?
- What needs to stay the same?
- What practices did not work well, and should be discontinued or improved?
- How can we design this together?

Co-creation builds buy-in and helps people feel part of the future instead of displaced by it. This is especially important when combining groups, expanding scope (for example, broadening parenting groups to include elder caregivers), or opening groups more widely across roles.

Build Community Through Smaller Circles

If an affinity group feels too large or hard to activate, start smaller.

Peer circles or community conversations are powerful precursors to affinity groups. Choose one topic and host a facilitated dialogue and see what level of interest is generated. This approach works especially well in distributed workplaces using Zoom or other virtual platforms.

Remember, not everything needs to be a formal group. Sometimes connection begins with conversation.

Take Action

Use these steps to bring purpose and momentum back into your affinity groups.

1. Revisit Your Purpose Together

In your next leadership meeting or group session, walk through the three pillars:

- How are we currently supporting connection?
- Where are we intentionally cultivating belonging and safety?
- How are we championing voices or insights into the organization?

Notice what feels strong and what feels unclear.

2. Map the Me / We / Us Expectations

Invite members to reflect on what they each bring to the group and what they hope to receive from it. Then, together, define how you want to show up for one another as a community and what you collectively hope to offer and gain. From there, clarify what your group contributes to the broader organization and what support, visibility, or resources you need in return.

Capture these agreements in writing so everyone has a shared understanding of purpose and boundaries. That clarity is what helps sustain the work and prevent burnout over time.

3. Co-Create the Year Ahead

Rather than having leaders plan in isolation, invite members into the process of shaping the group's direction and priorities. Create space to explore questions like:

- What topics matter most right now?
- How do we want to build community this year?
- What would make participation feel meaningful?

Even modest opportunities for collaboration can significantly increase ownership, engagement, and shared momentum.

4. Use Peer Circles to Build Momentum and Spark Energy

Whether you are revitalizing an existing affinity group or exploring interest in launching a new one, start by choosing a single topic and bringing people together for a facilitated conversation, either virtually or in person. Smaller circles often foster deeper connection than large meetings and create space for more voices to be heard. They also help surface emerging interests, needs, and ideas that can guide future programming.

If there isn't yet enough momentum for a full affinity group, community conversations can serve as a thoughtful precursor. Allow interest to emerge organically before formalizing structure, and use what you learn to shape a group design that reflects real engagement rather than assumed demand.

Organizations can also continue to host community conversations and peer circles for sub-groups within an affinity group to build psychological safety and connection. For example, a caregiving affinity group may create quarterly discussions for parents with children with disabilities, who may want to connect separately and talk about unique matters.

5. Clarify Leadership Roles and Succession

Take time to clearly define what it means to lead an affinity group, including expectations, scope, and support. Consider creating sub-roles, such as communications or events, to distribute responsibility and reduce burnout. Build intentional pathways for future leaders by inviting current leaders to identify potential successors and mentor them over time. Most importantly, recognize these roles as meaningful leadership positions within the organization, not informal volunteer tasks.

6. Create Feedback Loops

Establish consistent communication between affinity group leaders and organizational leadership so that insights, themes, and emerging concerns can be shared upward, while context, updates, and strategic direction are communicated back to the group. When information flows in both directions with intention and transparency, trust deepens and alignment becomes easier to sustain.

Closing Reflection

When purpose is clear, structure is shared, and voices are invited into the process, affinity groups become places of genuine connection, growth, and collective strength.

There is no “one-size-fits-all” way to build an affinity group. What matters most is staying grounded in why the group exists, being thoughtful about how it’s designed, and creating space for people to shape the experience together.

As you reflect on your own groups, consider this:

What kind of community are you building, and what might become possible if everyone felt ownership of that answer?

Small shifts in clarity, structure, and collaboration can make a meaningful difference over time.

Want Support Putting This Into Practice?

As a DFA member, you don’t have to do this work alone. We’re here to support you as you build communities that are thoughtful, sustainable, and deeply human.

Strategy Session

Each member organization receives an annual one-hour strategy session. Use this time to step back and look at what’s emerging, sort through competing priorities, work through a culture or leadership challenge, or identify where focused attention will make the biggest difference in the months ahead.

Policy Review

Members can submit one policy, framework, or initiative each year for feedback. This includes leadership models, culture roadmaps, flexibility or wellbeing initiatives, talent strategies, or other efforts connected to building a more human-centered workplace. Our goal is to offer thoughtful perspective, identify opportunities for alignment, and help strengthen what you are building.

Advisory Sessions (Champion and Leader Members)

Champion and Leader members have access to advisory sessions for ongoing support (8, 30-minute sessions and 4, 30-minute sessions, respectively). These sessions create space to think out loud, pressure-test decisions, navigate complexity, and move forward with greater clarity and confidence, especially during moments of change or experimentation.

We're here to walk alongside you as you continue building organizations where people and communities can thrive, now and in the future.