



“Unity Is Strength”

Collaboration New Orleans-style!

By Kristen E. Dennison, Sarah Thomas Pagels, and Bridget E. Harris

New Orleans, a melting pot of diverse cultures, hosted the 2019 Diversity for Success Seminar. No better venue on the eve of the seminar could host the first, joint fly-in meeting of three DRI committees. These committees joined forces for one morning in June to talk about what DRI means to them, what services DRI currently provides, and how DRI as an organization can help each of the committees reach their goals and achieve more for their members in the future. Members of the DRI Women in the Law (WITL), Corporate Counsel (Corporate Counsel or “C3”), and Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Committees came together to share ideas, experiences, and strategies to strengthen their individual and collective committee memberships and expand the services and benefits they can offer to DRI members at large. As one can imagine, with these three DRI committees combining over forty members in collaboration, the room was abuzz with new ideas, the atmosphere was charged with energy, and the attendees were excited about new possibilities.

While each committee broke out in the afternoon for their individual committee business meetings, the combined morning session featured a workshop designed to generate discussion on each committee’s strengths and successes, and how each committee could draw from the others’ strengths and successes. The energy generated in the workshop was contagious, and the new ideas created from the vibrant discussion seemed never-ending. The workshop focused on several key questions, bro-

ken into two main areas equally important to DRI and to its members.

The collaborative workshop was led by Kristen Dennison (Vice Chair, Corporate Counsel Committee), Diane Averell (Chair, WITL Committee), Rosary Hernandez (Chair, D&I Committee), Ricardo Woods (Vice Chair, D&I Committee), Douglas Burrell (DRI Second Vice President), and Joe Cohen (Liaison to the D&I Committee, DRI National Director, DRI Board of Directors). The first focus was on the “why,” specifically, why each individual member is involved in DRI. Everyone in the room could identify the moment they first got involved with DRI and what made them join DRI, and perhaps most importantly, what made them stay in DRI and become an active member. The stories of how each attendee became an active member in DRI had a common thread: it was personal. Each individual was pulled into DRI by another member who reached out, asked him or her to get involved, and helped that person understand that he or she belonged and had something to contribute. This led to individual members taking on a more active role within their committees, and eventually led to leadership roles within the larger DRI organization. The group recognized that DRI is a large organization, and it can be intimidating for a new or inactive member to find a way to become more involved. That is why it is so important for members to reach out to new and inactive members, make them feel like they belong, and show them where they can find a place to become more engaged and active in the organization. Universally, the consensus was that the more involved an individual member became, the more valuable the organization was to the member’s personal and professional life.

The second focus was on the “what,” specifically, what services and benefits DRI currently offers, and what additional services and benefits it can offer to make it more relevant to all defense lawyers—current members, potential members, and inactive members. Attendees enthusiastically shared their views on the services and benefits that DRI currently provides, producing a lengthy list, which included professional networking, friendship, opportunities to lead and to serve (both large and small), current and noteworthy content from seminars and publications, online programming, mentorship, inspiration, access to a national platform, career growth and development tools, expanding your



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network of personal and professional contacts, and potential referrals. Additionally, the attendees shared that participating in affinity groups such as the DRI Women in the Law, Diversity and Inclusion, and Young Lawyers Committees gives all DRI members a smaller subgroup within DRI that facilitates getting involved and meeting people, especially in different practice areas. The affinity groups also provide a safe space for young lawyers and diverse attorneys to learn, grow, and help their companies and firms to be diverse.

Despite this long list of benefits and services already provided, the group held an active discussion about further services and benefits that DRI could offer to make membership even more enticing and to serve all its members further. Stay tuned to see what else may develop as a result of the ideas generated in this meeting!

The C3 particularly benefited from the WITL and D&I Committees' experience on ways to build a strong and active steering committee to provide the best possible benefits and services to its members. The Corporate Counsel Committee is a unique committee within DRI, serving the needs of corporate counsel, whose members have different needs than other committees.

Corporate counsel members at the meeting shared thoughts and ideas on how DRI and the other committees can better serve corporate counsel. Currently, the biggest challenge that the Corporate Counsel Committee faces is getting the word out about the committee and what it can offer to corporate counsel, so the group held a lot of discussion on marketing the C3. The current C3 members shared the tremendous value that DRI offers to corporate counsel with free CLE, as well as networking with other corporate counsel and the cutting-edge content of DRI's programming. Creation of a network of strong liaisons from C3 to individual substantive law committees was one way envisioned to strengthen resources for both general content and programming. Moreover, current C3 members would like to see corporate counsel-only content at all committee seminars. Indeed, corporate counsel members present at the joint fly-in said that this was one of the most important offerings that other committees can bring to C3. With C3 liaisons and other committee leadership working

together to plan seminar content, they can work toward providing more content that gives corporate counsel solutions tailored to their problems at all DRI seminars.

The DRI Women in the Law and Diversity and Inclusion Committees also benefitted from the joint workshop. These committees had a unique opportunity to meet with corporate counsel to learn about the Corporate Counsel Committee's needs and to respond with concrete ideas to meet them. The C3 members also shared ideas on how the WITL and D&I Committees could tailor upcoming CLE offerings most beneficially to service our corporate counsel partners. While nothing is finalized, ideas included offering substantive or ethics training at fly-in meetings for those members serving on steering committees, with the WITL Committee serving as the test group for new concepts being considered by corporate counsel members and being a resource for hot topics and digital programming that is more responsive to corporate counsel needs (*e.g.*, creating podcasts or other digital content in response to corporate counsel questions, rather than waiting for the next annual seminar). Again, stay tuned as we flesh out and identify new opportunities for continued collaboration.

The joint fly-in meeting gave the D&I Committee the opportunity to give back to the community by volunteering at the Little League of New Orleans Diaper Drive, while simultaneously reflecting on meeting discussions about ways to serve the Corporate Counsel Committee and its DRI recruiting efforts effectively. The D&I Committee plans to continue its efforts to ensure that DRI is a *safe place for all*, so that every member can feel a sense of belonging in the legal profession, and the committee will also continue to implement fresh ideas that will target new lawyers, in the hopes that they will join the DRI family and get involved.

Finally, the joint fly-in meeting provided new connections. In fact, one steering committee member impressed one of the corporate counsel members enough to be added to the member's list of interviewees for the Corporate Counsel Expo on the last day of the Diversity for Success Seminar!

The meeting was so successful that it begged the question, "Why didn't we think of this before?" The attendees all expressed a desire to continue the joint meeting in

the future, recognizing, as Mattie Stepanek has said, "Unity is strength... when there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved." 