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Diversity

Requires *Attention and Effort*

By Ruth E. Thaler-Carter



There are those who would say diversity, or inclusion, is vital to business success today, while others still have to be persuaded that this is a valid and business-savvy issue.

Failures and their costs are legion and legendary: An automaker calls a car the Nova, which translates literally in Spanish as “no go” and doesn’t sell in Spanish-speaking countries; a new board game called Ghettopoly is raising eyebrows and reactions; and—right here and recently in Rochester—a local radio host is fired after making remarks interpreted as comparing a prominent black political candidate to an orangutan...Clearly, not everyone has gotten the message that some behaviors are beyond the limits of good taste and good sense, not to mention good business.

An Umbrella for Diversity Commitment

Despite recent blips, the Rochester area’s interest in and commitment to diversity can be seen in the growth and success of at least one entity devoted to this issue: the Greater Rochester Diversity Council (GRDC). In 1996, an alliance of 16 businesses, led by Bausch & Lomb, came together to sponsor the Rochester area’s first conference on workplace diversity. The event’s attendance and success far exceeded the most optimistic expectations and led to the formation of the GRDC. “We recognized the need for an ongoing organization to help its members understand the value of diversity to their businesses,” said Mike Streeter, current executive director of the Council. Today the Council has more than 35 members including businesses, non-profits, educational institutions, and health organizations. The conference has become a biennial event and continues to grow smoothly, attracting over 700 participants in 2002. Smaller events in “off” years continue the culture of creating a learning

organization.

In working with various businesses over the past several years, Streeter has seen that “too often, organizations try to do the work of diversity without understanding how it works. If you asked people to define diversity, you would get a different answer from everyone you ask. Originally, it had to do with race and gender; today, it’s about *all* of us—the similarities and differences that make us what we are. Today, we’re working toward creating an inclusive environment, where all feel welcome and valued.”

Vital to the process of achieving inclusion, said Streeter, is recognizing that “diversity involves everyone and is long-term. It’s about changing organizational culture to create an organization that naturally attracts people from all backgrounds who want to be part of it.” That can be counter to the nature of American business, which often is aimed at fast fixes, immediate results, and profit over everything else. “There may not be an immediate payoff, but the value will be clear over time,” Streeter said. “It’s not unlike quality work in that respect.”

Nor is diversity only about the workforce, Streeter noted; it’s also about customers and suppliers. “The internal component of managing diversity is to attract, develop and retain good talent from all segments of the workforce to ensure the success of your business. The external focus requires understanding the diversity of your customer base so you can provide products and service that best meet their requirements, and to develop a diverse network of suppliers to support that effort.”

Rather than miss the point by focusing strictly on hiring, Streeter said successful diversity efforts must focus on bringing more and varied ideas into the workplace. “It may be harder to work with differences,” he noted, “but the results are so much better.”

Rochester also is home to the Biracial Partnerships Program, an initiative of the Mayor’s Commission on Race and Ethnicity that began in 2000 and is aimed at fulfilling Mayor William A. Johnson’s vision of creating a prejudice-free culture in Rochester by fostering cross-cultural relationships in a city of different colors, cultures, and creeds. It brought together 160 of the region’s top leaders from business and industry, religion, education, government, law enforcement, justice, health, social services, and not-for-profit organizations with the goal of improving understanding and communication between different races, ethnic groups, and religions in the Rochester area. “We met biweekly for a year and explored diversity in our own group before we tried to serve as a guide to the community,” said member Charlotte Clarke, community affairs director at WOKR-TV 13; host of *Many Voices, Many Visions*; and a founding member of Rochester’s Moving Beyond Racism program. “We were charged with showing what we could do as a community to decrease the polarization between people.”

Partnership members paired up and met regularly through the year, both one-on-one and in groups because “the concept is based on the idea that one-on-one relationships are the strongest,” said Clarke. The first year involved partnerships between community leaders; after Sept. 11, 2001, the effort focused on partnering with key members of the local Muslim community; and current partnerships are among people in middle management of participating organizations. As with an organization’s internal leadership role in diversity, “the whole theory is that there’s a trickle-down effect; the results are gradual but they are there.”

Figuring it Out

According to Streeter, one way to measure diversity in a workplace is to look at “who’s here”—the actual make-up of a workforce—but the real question is “how well are they working?” To figure out this important aspect, “you can create a program around managing diversity, set expectations, measure steps toward achieving those goals. It’s a learning

process, but you get better at it as time goes on.”

Streeter has seen that diversity must originate from the top of the hierarchy to succeed and be at all meaningful. “If diversity originates in HR, it’s dead,” he said bluntly. “It must be a commitment of top leadership. In the past, such efforts were supported by management; they were ‘allowed’ and had lower status than other genuine ventures.”

There also must be sufficient resources for the effort to succeed; “if you have enthusiasm but not enough resources, if the organization gets ahead of its leadership, you can have a rudderless ship,” Streeter warned.

Some of those resources include:

- The GRDC (<http://www.rochesterdiversitycouncil.com/>)
- The Biracial Partnerships Program of the (Rochester) Mayor’s Commission on Race and Ethnicity (c/o Elena Tomanovich, Idea Connections, 585-442-4110, ext. 3104)
- Profiles in Diversity journal (GRDC members receive a subscription as a membership benefit)
- Diversityinc.com (Website and magazine)
- Conferences, both general and focused, of various organizations involved in diversity-related issues
- The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), which publishes Mosaics, a newsletter devoted to diversity, and sponsors conferences and a diversity awards program to “recognize the achievements and efforts that serve to improve and advance the principles of diversity in and around the workplace or community” (www.shrm.org; Genesee Valley Chapter: <http://www.gvcshrm.org>. SHRM Area I Diversity Awards Nominations—Ed Anderson, SHRM Area I Diversity Director, 207-828-0509 or edanderson@ups.com)

Assessing and Ensuring Diversity

As a starting point, here are a few suggestions for assessing and ensuring diversity:

- No matter what a company makes, it’s probably being purchased by diverse customer groups— either individuals in a variety of economic levels and ethnic backgrounds, or other companies and governments in different countries. Make sure your staff, support documentation, sales and advertising materials, in-house and external publications, etc., reflect this in their illustrations, languages, and distribution patterns.
- Appearances matter. Make sure the names and faces at the reception desk and on the phones, in the company photos and annual reports, on the Website, and in your news releases, etc., reflect diversity, especially if your clients and customers include a variety of ethnic or international groups.
- Today’s workforce is diverse by definition. If a leadership or management photo shows only white males, people (and opportunities) are missing and your audiences will notice. Do something about it. Make sure your HR department is including nontraditional publications, Websites, career fairs, educational institutions, community organizations, professional associations, and the myriad other resources for including people of all backgrounds when hiring.
- Regardless of whether the organization has a diversity effort in place, consider bringing in a consultant to assess how it is doing in this arena. An objective outsider may be able to identify aspects of the organization's staffing, services, communications materials, and other elements that are not as inclusive—and thus not as profitable—as

leadership would like. If the organization is fulfilling diversity goals, it may be eligible for recognition for its efforts that could result in positive public-relations benefits. **BSM**

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