

Diversity discussions enhance awareness at APWA

Weekly sessions foster open communication, interaction among staff

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Earlier this year, APWA implemented its own take on diversity awareness training in its Kansas City headquarters office. However, “training” does not adequately describe the approach used. Instead, time is dedicated for honest and informal discussions on particular aspects of diversity during weekly staff meetings. Discussions began as a method to enhance diversity awareness and to emphasize how such differences among staff can be fully appreciated for what they bring to work. Conversations have been engaging and genuine. Building trust and team spirit has occurred since the effort to examine issues supporting diversity awareness began. Consequently, a more productive and enjoyable work environment has materialized. Numerous diversity articles and reports profess that these are *exactly* the kinds of results to expect.

The argument for diversity is strong and enormous support is evident from lengthy case studies to simple reason. Diversity awareness is essential for the continued vitality of an organization in a global economy, and particularly as trends predict significant increases in diversified workforces. In order to create a strong and resilient workforce, employers must attract and retain employees who are qualified, motivated, and dedicated to the goals of the organization. Such an outcome is produced in a work environment that is positive, nurturing, and sensitive to diversity.

Admittedly, it is early for APWA to fully evaluate the effectiveness of its diversity sessions, but hopeful signs of positive outcomes are already emerging. For example, staff turnover experienced a surprising decline for the first time in several years since the sessions began. However, the effectiveness of *any* training program must be continuously measured and evaluated. APWA has identified the following components that have contributed to the continued success of its program.

1. The leadership is actively involved. Top management has accepted personal responsibility in delivering the message that APWA is committed to the importance of diversity as a workforce issue. This is important since the leadership holds a greater capacity to mold organizational culture with direct endorsement and participation. In doing so, management confirms its commitment to the organization.

For example, **Kaye Sullivan**, Deputy Executive Director, personally conducted the first several sessions at APWA’s Kansas City office. Not only did she conduct these sessions, but she also initiated the efforts in the Kansas City office. Her lead and approach provided a foundation. Goals were clearly defined and tied to the organizational mission. Her active involvement opened doors of communication and encouraged interaction. Staff quickly began to share personal experiences. Opposing views may be evident at times, but discussions have maintained a level of respect and appreciation among staff—

the only true “ground rule.” The timing also plays a role in success, as these efforts were not prompted by incidents signaling problems with acceptance of diversity issues.

“These discussions have helped me understand the behavior and expectations of others. I realize that attitudes I once perceived as selfish are, in part, products of the generation and environment in which we grow and learn. Candid comments made and stories shared have enabled us to tailor our interaction on an individual basis. I believe the environment of caring and the goal of understanding each other enabled staff to be open and honest. While the level of sharing might be unique to this particular group of people, I would highly recommend this kind of sharing and potential discussion for every organization.”
– Teresa Hon, Professional Development Coordinator

2. Diversity is broadly defined and all-inclusive. APWA has not limited its diversity focus to the legally-protected classifications such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, etc. Rather, APWA strives to assure that diversity includes *all* employees with discussions about differences such as generational identity, location of residence, level of education, communication styles, personality, skill sets, etc. The promotion of diversity is not an affirmative action or an equal opportunity program. APWA views this diversity initiative as supporting the values of all individuals—their differing perspectives and full inclusion into the workplace.

“One of the biggest diversity issues I personally deal with is stereotyping women. Embracing diversity means that we accept individuals for who they are and what they contribute to society, the workplace, the community, the environment, home, and with each other. I should not be judging others because of my values, interests, ideas, background, and status in life. And hopefully, others will not judge me according to their own values, etc. Once we realize that we tend to stereotype people or have prejudices, we can deal with them in a constructive manner.” – Kaye Sullivan, Deputy Executive Director

3. The responsibility is shared. The commitment to diversity is not a job belonging to one person or department. Staff in various positions and departments guide APWA diversity efforts and discussions. All employees are encouraged to lead a session on a topic of their choice or by using a favorite resource. For example, **Lee Hawkins**, Director of Member Services, contributed his diversity expertise from a previously held position while guiding several lively discussions. During another session, **Kevin Clark**, Editor, brought several issues of the *APWA Reporter* for discussion to illustrate a historical perception of women within APWA. **Tracy Alfaro**, Receptionist & Administrative Clerk, has also championed the cause for diversity by researching topics to include in educational messages distributed to staff. Regardless of who *leads* the effort, full participation (even from the quietest employees) drives the success.

“What I have appreciated about our diversity discussions during our weekly staff meetings is learning that diversity goes way beyond race and gender issues. Our diversity sessions have helped me better understand and value the differences in all of us, and will

help me in my working relationships with my colleagues at APWA.” – Kevin Clark, Editor

4. The delivery is repeated and the format is varied. Diversity awareness training cannot be effective if it is conducted on an annual basis. It should be entrenched within an organization throughout every function, every facet. The session formats have also played an important role in success. The resources have been excellent and the formats have encouraged interaction without the use of role-playing or exercises, which can be a real turn-off to some people. APWA tries to listen to employees in order to allow feedback to guide program content and design. Losing the interest of employees will hinder the process of strengthening a commitment to diversity. APWA has already experimented with a few formats and prepares for the next change in the course of action in support of diversity efforts.

The following are some examples of varied sessions and delivery:

- Over a few sessions, staff viewed the video, “The Eye of the Storm.” This is the award-winning documentary that chronicled a third-grade teacher’s experiment in dividing her students according to eye color, making each group superior or inferior. The nature and effects of prejudice were demonstrated by evident changes in behavior and learning patterns. APWA stopped the video periodically for discussions during this extremely thought-provoking video, which is available at many public libraries.
- The intimacy of staff conducting presentations is valuable, but perspectives from guest speakers are refreshing changes in routine. APWA has only had one guest speaker participate at this time, with more planned for future discussions. Guest speaker **Michele Ohmes**, ADA/disABILITY Specialist for the City of Kansas City, Missouri, provided a lively program for the Kansas City office. She reminded staff that everyone is disabled in some way (i.e., glasses) and that the limitation is not the person, but the environment (i.e., stairs, narrow halls, doorways). APWA is fortunate to have a colleague like Michele nearby, but there are many organizations that will gladly assist in providing speakers for diversity-related issues as part of their mission.
- As previously mentioned, a session was delivered on how women have improved their status within the association over the past 25-30 years, based on their representation in the *APWA Reporter*. Humor added greatly to the delivery of this session, as staff was ready for a lightened mood. The information was fascinating as progress was clearly visible. Many employees saw evidence that, at one time, no women were represented in newsworthy contributions throughout the magazine. However, women *were* represented in a number of unfavorable product advertisements. Of course, much continues to change since then, including APWA award titles—“Man of the Year” is now “Leader of the Year.” If your organizational history isn’t documented in a comparable format, employment applications and interview questions used 30 years ago can be used as an alternative to stimulate interesting reactions among groups of people. Just be sure that you are not still using the same documents for recruitment!

- Designated space on the APWA Intranet has been created where calendars, articles, Web links and resources are posted and archived. These diversity resources continue to build each month and are readily available for reference.
- Messages are distributed to all staff through e-mail providing information about particular aspects of diversity. This idea, suggested by APWA's receptionist, began as recognition of women in public works during women's history month. However, since that time, a number of aspects have been addressed with historical information serving as a reminder for the importance of such awareness. For example, many younger employees were not aware that Asian Americans were held captive in internment camps during World War II. Even the somber tones of some messages add to the positive culture of the organization.

“As I was driving in to work this morning, I heard disc jockeys making jokes targeted at Asian Americans and how they speak the English language. After all of the reading I have done in support of our diversity initiatives, I did NOT find it funny. I am hoping that, if someone as bullheaded as I am can change their way of thinking and recognize a racial slur like this, it can make a difference. The best way to fight prejudice is with knowledge. As we put knowledge in, ignorance is pushed out along with our prejudices. If we are educated about the suffering and hardships that people have gone through, it becomes easier to understand different cultures, races, etc.” – Tracy Alfaro, Receptionist

5. Resistance is carefully handled. Little resistance by staff has occurred at APWA. The majority of employees have expressed appreciation for these sessions and indicated that they look forward to them. However, organizations must be prepared to evaluate the distinctions between differing views, resistance, and intolerance. If open communication is encouraged, then employees may feel comfortable sharing information that may be perceived in a range as wide as vulnerable and supportive to skeptical and hostile. For example, a few sessions at APWA have focused on generational differences. During one of these sessions, staff pointed out that some of the materials were offensive due to the evidence of stereotyping behavior. The discussion did not end sourly; rather, it heightened awareness. A defensive reaction would have produced damaging results. The perception of a reprimand creates distrust and hinders efforts if “political correctness” overtakes the opportunity to learn from one another.

“I appreciate the time and energy placed in staff diversity communications about those who have overcome so many obstacles to achieve success, freedom and happiness while playing a role to provide a better future for their families and others. Some stories were very disturbing as the hatred that people carry for one another is saddening, while others were overwhelmingly inspirational.” – Teri Newhouse, Finance Director

“I have really looked forward to our staff meetings knowing that they will end in insightful and honest discussions. Our diversity “sharing” has been invaluable to me as it has given me new perspective. It's been an incredible way to get to know co-workers unlike any working experience I've had previously. I've taken so much away with me and

have found myself recently involved in similar discussions outside of work, obviously fueled by stories I've heard during these sessions. I think it has helped us all become less quick to judge others and has created a greater understanding.” – Diana Forbes, Meetings Coordinator

The cost of intolerance in the workplace is like a deadly virus. The acceptance of differing views is the point of diversity awareness, but there is no room for discrimination and mistreatment of employees and customers.

Time is precious, but that has been the only cost to APWA for its diversity initiatives in Kansas City. Morale suffers when employees feel unappreciated for their contributions, unvalued, and excluded as individuals. With the cost of turnover, lost productivity due to inter-group conflicts, and potential employment lawsuits, how can an organization afford *not* to support the efforts of diversity?

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The following websites provide excellent sources of material on diversity initiatives:

- www.shrm.org/diversity/
- www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/Topic/Diversity/
- www.DiversityInc.com
- www.diversitycentral.com/
- “Best Practices in Achieving Workforce Diversity” at www.doc.gov/studies/workforce-diversity.pdf