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Susan Brooks
Service Enthusiast

We Are Family: Diversity in the Workplace

By Susan Brooks

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Diversity needs to be a mindful ‘work in progress’. If you’re not continually looking for ways to diversify your organization - your staff, your culture, your products and/or services – you’re really missing the boat. Not only the money boat, where profit margins dwindle and employee turnover rises, but the life boat as well. Because, lest we forget, what we do in our own individual worlds most definitely has an impact on the much larger world we all live in.

The #1 characteristic of great leadership, according to Stephen Covey, is to be continually learning: reading, training, listening to others with an open mind and heart, asking questions, and recognizing that our teachers are everywhere. Interesting also that most totalitarian leaders like Hitler, Stalin, and Saddam Hussein never traveled to the unfamiliar to see and learn about different backgrounds and cultures. Why? Because they didn’t want their fundamental orthodoxy challenged, that’s why. Life today requires a greater need for tolerance, understanding and honoring our differences more than ever before. Our world is at war. We are killing each other in the name of peace. How we can best serve is by making our own world, our world of work and family a better place. We have to set the example, *be* that example, that inspires an open heart and a welcoming mind to all shapes, sizes, and colors of being human. That’s what great leaders do. That’s how we learn, that’s how we create change, enjoying harmony and real peace.

Diversity is a fully loaded opportunity when you look at the increasing numbers of minorities affecting not only the make-up of the labor work force but also the makeup of the marketplace. If more and more minorities are *making* money, then that means there’s more and more minorities *spending* money. It would be a real competitive advantage to cultivate and manage a diverse staff that can also help attract diverse customers and even more employees, bringing different perceptions that will contribute to the creativity and outreach of an organization. According to R.M. Wentling in his article,

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“Diversity in the Workplace,” he lets us all know that “there are many forces driving diversity issues in organizations: there is a significant increase in women and minority populations in the workplace; an increasing number of minority youths entering the work force as well as more mature Americans leaving it; gay men, lesbians, and bisexual individuals are becoming more and more important in our work force and marketplace; people with disabilities are also increasingly entering the labor force.”

So what’s an HR manager to do with all this information and bottom line opportunity? How do you shift your company’s culture? I thought you’d never ask!

Of course it all begins with hiring the right people. The appreciation of diversity, just like service enthusiasm, cannot be mandated, as hard as we might try to make it so. Spirited service and connection are acts of the heart. So, as leaders, we have to start by looking for that openness and attitude in our applicants. Then, by wiggling our way into the emotional arena, with training and by setting a stage ripe for discovery, help our staff to feel, in their bones, the human-ness of our work and life purpose, individually and together.

Here’s a great exercise that I used just last month with a client whose staff needed cohesion and a greater effort at team building. Their differences separated them into competitive cliques and, because what I do in my customer service and leadership trainings is to renew spirit and celebrate diversity, this exercise brought fun and connection to an otherwise serious and delicate issue:

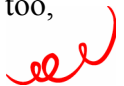
I asked everyone in this group of 65 people to think silently about what animal or living thing they would want to be other than a human. I watched them process this question, seeing them imagine all the possibilities: sea creatures, trees, mushrooms, lions, dolphins, elephants, and on and on. Here’s where you, as the facilitator, make a choice. If you are willing to take a risk, then ask the group to think of a behavior, action, or sound that represents their creature or living thing, and then to act like it, encouraging interaction and movement, of course. If you’d rather play it safe this round, that’s OK, too,

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by simply moving to the next step in this exercise, forming specie groupings and flocks, and creating dialogue about the gifts, talents, and blind spots of each special group then, most importantly, translating this conversation more specifically to the different qualities and skills that they as people bring to your organization and co-workers. Guaranteed, after this exercise, barriers will drop away and hearts will be more open to connection.

Indeed, diversity can be experienced and, as a result, a greater respect and honoring of each other's differences can be celebrated. Because, after all, embracing diversity in the culture of our organizations is essential not only to real teamwork, but ultimately, to our bottom lines...and our world.

Susan Brooks is a Service Enthusiast. With 30 years of business experience as co- owner of the Tempe-based, multi-million dollar gift company, Cookies From Home, and through her consulting firm, Serves You Right!, she provides keynotes, workshops, and corporate trainings. Her customized programs focus on, customer service, leadership development, and teambuilding. Contact her at Susan@ServesYouRight.net.

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