

Features

5/1/2019

Look Beyond the Mirror: A Diverse Workforce

Katie Elzer-Peters

This month, we're diving deeper, beyond policies (though we will discuss some of those) and getting to the root of our businesses: the people. Specifically, about building workforces that aren't homogenous (everyone looks and acts the same), bringing together staff with different backgrounds, racial heritage, genders, and life views, in a functional—rather than a dysfunctional—way.

In the last article, Sid Raisch, CEO of Horticultural Advantage, mentioned that everyone comes to work pulling a suitcase full of baggage — our beliefs and experiences — and you never know how that's going to play out in the workforce, in part, because most of us don't even realize we have certain beliefs until we're confronted with them. There's no place like a business with people who might not have chosen to spend eight or 10 or 12 hours a day with each other to reveal those beliefs. The workforce can be a pressure cooker, amplifying beliefs and tendencies, with the result being a place of positive change or a long-simmering disaster.

“We Grow More Than Collards”

It didn't even occur to me that we needed an article about building a diverse workforce until I read a thoughtful and important article, “We Grow More than Collards,” by a colleague of mine, Teri Speight, a garden writer at Cottage in the Court. To be frank, I'm embarrassed that I didn't even think about including this article in a series about building a strong workforce (a series that I pitched to Green Profit). Luckily, I know smart people like Teri, so I have the opportunity to learn.

Teri said, “More often than not, when society thinks about the African-American in horticulture, we are generally considered experts in Urban Gardening or Farming. A few weeks ago, I asked the question ‘Where are the African-American voices in horticulture that are not farmers or urban gardeners?’ A few looked at the post—a few retweeted it—however, no one really answered it. Where are the voices that look like me ...? We want to hear from someone who looks like us. The younger generation needs to know that gardening for beauty is not an uncommon act for our community.”

Look Beyond the Mirror

Our industry is insular, but, to some extent, that could be said about every industry. Kiahnna D. Patton, a senior HR professional with degrees from UCLA (BA), Howard University (MBA) and USC (Master of Nonprofit Leadership and Management), along with an alphabet of certifications and years working for Fortune 500 companies, says, “People hire people who look like them; that is what they know. It's not always malicious.”

This is called “implicit bias,” which the Society for Human Resource Management defines as, “Implicit bias occurs when individuals make judgments about people based on gender, race or other prohibited factors without even realizing they’re doing it.”

It might not be malicious in intent, and we might not even realize that we’re doing it, but when we only hire, interact, market to and project an image that mirrors only our own experience, we’re missing out.

Impacting the Bottom Line

Is it harsh to lead with money in a discussion of why it’s important to move beyond what seems to be a “horticulture-so-white” situation? Maybe. But money is what a lot of people pay attention to. So, if nothing else, think of the business bottom line. (We’ll get to the rest in a bit.)

The Brookings Institute reports that, “new [census] statistics project that the nation will become ‘minority white’ in 2045. During that year, whites will comprise 49.7% of the population in contrast to 24.6% for Hispanics, 13.1% for blacks, 7.9% for Asians, and 3.8% for multiracial populations.”

If we want our businesses to survive, then we need to make sure everyone feels welcome in our circle. We grow and sell plants, something essential to life on earth. There’s no reason everyone on this planet couldn’t be our customer unless we shut them out, even if it’s unintentional.

How to Widen the Circle

It has to start at the top. Abra Lee, the former Landscape Manager for Hartsfield Jackson International Airport, Agricultural and Natural Resources Agent with UGA extension, and Class of 2020 Longwood Fellow, says, “You need different perspectives and you don’t know what the other person has to offer until you offer them a position of power or influence so that they can show you what they can offer.”

Kiahnna says that qualifications don’t automatically result in access. “It’s hard to move if you don’t have an advocate in a space you’re in. It’s hard to move, especially in large and complex companies.”

Many green industry businesses are uniquely positioned to advocate from the top down for greater access because many are smaller or family-owned companies. Enacting change for 20 or 50 or 100 people is a different ballgame than enacting change for 2,000 people. Here are some ways to do it:

- Advocate for staff in minority or underrepresented groups to receive training, new projects, or to apply for or be hired for leadership roles.
- Set company policies of behavioral expectations and model them from the top down.
- Facilitate opportunities for interaction based on interests. Instead of pizza lunch for all staff, during which everyone will sit with their cliques or groups, offer activities where people can naturally create connections. “If you don’t organize it, it won’t happen,” Kiahnna says. It helps build a cohesive team when people can bond over shared hobbies and experiences and things they’re genuinely interested in. Two people could have two vastly different upbringings, but if they both love sports cars or movies or fashion, they have a common point of entry for a relationship based on something other than organization charts.
- Facilitate open communication and establish parameters for potentially hot-point discussions. Listen and ask questions. “There’s this fear of asking the wrong thing,” Kiahnna says. We have to try anyway, but having ground rules and a supportive environment will help.
- Make sure employees understand their rights. If you’re proactive in alerting employees to anti-discrimination and inclusion rights, you’ll be much more likely to uphold the principles that advocate for those rights.

“It’s hard to change hearts and minds,” Kiahnna says. “I would hope that people who recognize that their spaces are homogenous will open their hearts and minds to the experiences of other people and learn to advocate for other people in those spaces.” **GP**

Katie Elzer-Peters is a garden writer and owner of The Garden Of Words, LLC, a marketing and PR firm handling mostly green industry clients. Contact her at Katie@thegardenofwords.com or at www.thegardenofwords.com.

Resources for Learning about Diversity and Inclusion

Legal Matters

There are anti-discrimination laws applicable to all businesses, starting with businesses that have as few as one employee. Those legal requirements are listed and explained at www.eeoc.gov.

Training & Articles

HR professional Kiahnna Patton recommends the trainings, articles and resources provided by the Society for Human Resource Management (www.shrm.org). Under the Resources & Tools tab, they have an entire section about diversity and inclusion.