

If You Build an Environment for Diversity, Numbers Take Care of Themselves

By Del Galloway, APR

Past President and CEO, 2004

Public Relations Society of America

Following two well-publicized embarrassments over insensitive player behavior, the San Francisco 49ers professional football team conducted a diversity workshop that covered a wide range of diversity sensitivity, including race, gender and sexual orientation.

It was the right thing to do, of course, because even professional football players live in the real world that comprises all kinds of people. The workshop was a practical thing to do, too. One of the instigators said the workshop was necessary because "we want everybody to be fans of the 49ers" and "we can't go around doing anything that's going to harm the relationship" with the 49ers' fan base. Afterward, even players who initially balked at attending, wanted to keep the workshop secret from other NFL teams because the process brought team members closer together, which they felt created a competitive edge.

That's a good lesson for all of us. Commitment to diversity means becoming a better organization because you're doing the right thing for the right moral reason. And, it's probably going to make you more successful.

We've all heard the expression "strength through diversity." Indeed, that adage truly underpins the foundation of our nation. We're a better country because of our diversity. In business, executives make better decisions with input from and understanding of the views and needs of the widest array of stakeholders. You trust judgment more of people you're around every day and with whom you have an open, honest discourse. You understand needs of customers and clients better only if you have candid two-way communications with them and know them as people.

A couple of years ago, the Public Relations Society of America adopted diversity as a strategic imperative for the organization. Like many organizations, however, we learned that achieving diversity requires focus and hard work. It does little good to simply endorse diversity as a good, moral thing. It also must be embraced as a practical thing not only for our own organization, but for the wide array of organizations, companies and institutions our members represent. As skilled communicators, public relations professionals can - and must - play vital roles in engendering an understanding of the dual benefits of diversity.

We must urge the organizations we work with to go beyond token counting - measuring percentages and tracking statistics. An organization may have a workforce that statistically tracks demographics of the nation - the right number of African-Americans, Asians and Hispanics, women, older Americans, younger Americans, gays, Republicans, Democrats, Christians, Jews and Muslims - and visible and aggressive recruitment programs may ensure those numbers remain in lockstep with ever-changing makeup of the community. But those statistics are meaningless unless a commitment to diversity has been woven into the corporate fabric, goes beyond tracking the measurable variables, extends to

diversity of opinions and viewpoints, attitudes and values, and provides all those involved with the organization continuous opportunities to show their strengths.

How effective will "recruitment" programs be in the long term if we do not tap the strength of that "diverse" population for those who will lead the organization five, 10 and 20 years from now when the U.S. population will be the most diverse in the world? How productive will diversity efforts be if we don't use them to build our knowledge base and our strategies for the future? Will we have in place at decision-making tables in corporations and institutions a wide array of seasoned, executive-level professionals who understand and communicate with the booming Hispanic population in Minnesota, the established Arab-American community in Detroit, the fast-growing second- and third-generation Vietnamese-American and Laotian-American families in Atlanta?

Part of the PRSA diversity initiative includes an understanding that, to help others work toward and achieve the benefits of diversity, we must be role models. And, our roles extend nationally and locally.

PRSA's Miami chapter set a beautiful example. During the past decade the chapter increased its minority and ethnic representation from 12 percent to 44 percent. More important, it gave those new and diverse members something to do. Its leadership today comprises white men and women, Hispanic-Americans, Haitian-Americans, new and seasoned professionals, Christians, Jews, gays and lesbians, educators and solo practitioners, and people who work in corporations, big and small agencies and nonprofit organizations.

Although the Miami chapter's numbers may not exactly match the statistics for the area it serves, which contains one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse populations in the country, "it achieved its success by viewing diversity as both "the right thing to do" and the "good for business thing to do" for the organization to survive and thrive," said Rosanna Fiske, chair of PRSA's national diversity committee and board member.

We build diversity by establishing programs and networking opportunities rich with value to people of different backgrounds and by providing leadership opportunities for all. And we must build equally meaningful relationships between our organizations and the ever-diversifying populations they serve.