

When Diversity and Inclusion Become Second Nature

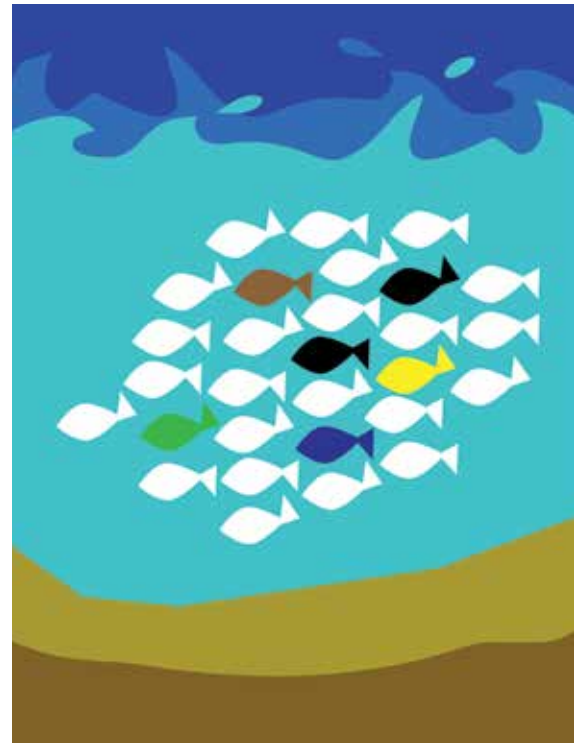
By Matt Adams, P.E.

It can be said that the move toward diversity started in 1964 with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. If you can't remember it from your history class, this act prohibits employers from discriminating against employees on the basis of sex, race, color, national origin, and religion. Fifty-four years later, the concept of workplace diversity is ubiquitous and is rarely mentioned without the additional concept of inclusion. Most of our peers have had diversity goals for hiring and procurement for decades. There are some institutions that don't enthusiastically strive for workplace diversity or inclusion.

However, there are many others that have adopted these principles as core values. These peer institutions have gone beyond simple annual targets to much more sophisticated programs encompassing all levels of the organization and now, local communities. These determined institutions have proven to themselves that diversity and inclusion are not just culturally appropriate activities, but offer tangible benefits to both the institution and the community. Stated another way, in a world often driven by the bottom line, it is clear that genuine efforts at workplace diversity and inclusion yield significant returns on investment.

EMPLOYING NEW BEST PRACTICES

The business of higher education is changing very fast; reviewing the results of the APPA annual Thought Leaders symposium offers proof of this fact. What they reveal is that while money is still one of the primary drivers of change, the traditional operations of our institutions of higher learning are under review. Facilities departments have operated



under the unofficial mantra of “do more with less” for decades—but now entire universities are under this pressure.

The long-term viability of some institutions is at risk; for most, internal change is required. This often means adopting best practices that other industries have employed for decades—including diversity and inclusion. The largest asset that any institution manages is its faculty, staff, and students. Not unlike a company, a university is really nothing more than the sum of the values and performance of its people. Given this realization, our peer leaders are recognizing that diversity and inclusion are key values to help institutions of higher learning survive and thrive for the next 50 years. Our people represent the largest opportunity for performance improvement for each of our institutions. This knowledge is coupled with the fact that as baby boomers retire, it is getting more and more difficult to attract talent.

One example of a university that is proactive in the area of diversity and inclusion is the University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder). Known as a progressive institution, the university is a leader in the recognition of diversity and inclusion as “values” and not obligations. Terri Willis, CU Boulder’s director of human resources for infrastructure and sustainability, explains one diversity initiative she is working on: “In a recent discussion with our Pac-12 FM human resources group, we talked about

how hiring and retention are top concerns for us—especially in the skilled-trades positions. Getting referrals from current employees is one good way to help fill that pipeline. Employees who work in organizations with healthy, inclusive work cultures are more likely to refer their family and friends for these vacancies.”

HUMANS NEED TO FEEL NEEDED AND CONNECTED

Increasingly we hear a great deal of talk about the culture of our facilities departments. Our peer leaders clearly believe that investing in and nurturing that culture is paramount to success. As the famous management theorist and educator Peter Drucker once said, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” We know that a positive culture is based on the core values we select for ourselves and demonstrate in many forms. A culture including the values of diversity and inclusion either directly creates or passively enables a great many tangible and intangible benefits to our institutions and respective facilities departments.

Willis points out one of the greatest of these benefits: A culture of diversity and inclusion helps our department become an “employer of choice.” Just as important as the acquisition of good people is their engagement (read inclusion) in our workplace, such that we actually fulfill some of their human needs. Staff are fulfilled when they feel welcomed and sense that they belong—this is the definition of inclusion. Humans need to feel needed and connected.

Fulfilling this need can bring significant advantages to our institutions. We need a diverse workforce to meet the future employment needs of our institutions. However, this diverse workforce will be fulfilled and productive only if the workplace culture is one of inclusion. If inclusion is real, our people will thrive in this culture—and the resulting benefits for our FM departments are many. If our most valuable assets—our people—are thriving, the return on investment is so significant that no complex financial models are required to see it. How much is a conservative 5 percent increase in all positive performance value metrics worth to you at this point of change in our industry?

Earlier I mentioned that some leaders are exploring the philosophy of diversity and inclusion with much more sophistication than others. Many are beyond the basic concepts and now seek to learn, create, and implement new best practices to

nurture their cultures. At the University of Chicago (UChicago), Derek R. B. Douglas, vice president for civic engagement and external affairs, states that he intends to help the university quickly reach a point “when diversity and inclusion are second nature.” There is no doubt that for most institutions, implementing these values will soon become a commonly applied business practice as routine as cost accounting, safety training, or professional development.

THE IMPACT ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The next level of sophistication in incorporating diversity is demonstrated at UChicago by looking at the impact that its culture of inclusion has on the local community surrounding the university. Its facilities department has voluntarily set more aggressive diversity goals for itself—its targets of 35 percent minority business enterprises (MBE) and 6 percent women’s business enterprises (WBE) are in fact higher than the City of Chicago’s targets. However, the deep “town-and-gown” relationship necessitated by these goals has many benefits for the community. In order to meet its aggressive quotas, the university must invest in the local community in “multidimensional” ways, including mentorship programs; partnerships with large contracting, design, and supply firms; and support of local high schools and technical colleges.

The university also supports small businesses in its five surrounding zip codes as they grow from sole proprietors to much larger enterprises. These and other practices help strengthen the local community and create a vibrant, multicultural business climate good for both the local residents and the university—it’s a win-win situation. Approximately 55 percent of the faculty and staff of UChicago live in the local area; and if this locality is attractive, vibrant, and inclusive, everyone wins.

As diversity and inclusion have now become best practices for the facilities industry, new and clever ideas are popping up—and many of the best of them come straight from the local community. Direct communication with that community enables our universities to discover new ways to nurture and grow cultures of diversity and inclusion. The benefits are obvious, and the math is simple. Now a group of champions are moving these value-based cultures to the next level. ☛

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