

OPENING MINDS, OPENING DOORS THROUGH 'WE'

**Creating an inclusive
and inviting association
community for all.**

By Heather Ryndak Swink, CAE, M.A.

Diversity and inclusion efforts in the workforce continue to gain attention and traction, especially in light of monumental LGBT national developments. Consider that within only a few months, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled to allow same-sex marriage, the Boy Scouts of America officially ended a ban on gay leaders, and the Pentagon decided that transgender people may openly serve in the U.S. military. In pop culture, Caitlyn Jenner's very public gender transition has intensified the spotlight on LGBT issues.

Given all the recent rulings, programs, discussions and debates, associations have a tremendous opportunity to address the needs of diverse professionals. Burt Blanchard, director of business development for the Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals, has a personal as well as professional interest in associations becoming better educated—and educating others—on diversity and inclusion, especially transgender workplace equality.

"My son began questioning his identity around age 12," Blanchard says. "In April 2013—through consultation with doctors and other professionals—we found support for him through Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago.

"Our son, who is now a college freshman and taking steps to aid in his gender transition, is taking this journey one day at a time. As we walked through this as a family, there were times I struggled with what was the right thing to do. If there's anything that helps in these situations, it's getting information, getting educated."

What can associations do to create opportunities and an environment that is accepting, inclusive and welcoming to individuals like Blanchard's son?

"The association community has an opportunity to get and stay educated about transgendered individuals by learning about what transgendered individuals go through, how early

thought and actions start, and what a day in the life is like for a transgendered person," Blanchard says. "Regardless of where people are on the spectrum of acceptance and non-acceptance, don't do diversity as a chore. Let's not move toward checking the box, for example, on having certain racial or ethnic diversity on a panel, on the board, etc. It's a dead model.

"Instead, bring experts and, thus, value to any conversation, event, education, with the expressed understanding that transgendered individuals are people who happen to work in an association, and it's the course of business to 1) engage them, 2) allow them to belong by being 'at the table', and 3) help in creating what association scope, focus, and make up will be at all levels of association business for the future.

Introducing 'WE'

Association Forum is responding to this challenge by creating a Welcoming Environment, or "WE," initiative. The organization defines welcoming environment as "the creation of a sense of belonging and connectedness that engages individuals in an authentic manner in which uniqueness is valued, respected and supported through opportunities and interaction." WE concept and business plans were both approved by the Association Forum's board at its October 2014 and March 2015 meetings, respectively.

In June, the Diversity and Inclusion Committee was renamed to the Welcoming Environment Committee to represent all differences among the entire membership population, and is charged with "promoting diversity and inclusion by ensuring that Association Forum makes everyone who interacts with Association Forum feel welcomed and valued," according to WE Committee Chair Pierre Désy, MPH, CAE, who also is executive director of the International Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons & IAOMS Foundation.

"Our mission is to ensure that the WE concept is woven through every aspect of Association Forum's approach to organizational development, education, volunteer leadership, communication, and marketing," Désy says. Its goals this year include developing an online diversity resource guide and promoting engagement through social events, communication, membership, website, social media, publications, and education. The committee will also monitor metrics to gauge the success of WE efforts.

Blanchard is encouraged by the WE concept.



"The Association Forum is poised to be a major force in the movement to creating opportunities through its game-changing WE mantra," Blanchard says. "As a recent past chair of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee, I believe the WE plan completely makes sense and is going to lead the change desperately needed in many association structures, visions, goals, actions, plans and strategies."

A Diversity Journey

Association Forum formally initiated diversity efforts in 1989 by supporting ASAE's Diversity Executive Leadership Program (DELP) through complimentary membership and other support. Five years later, Association Forum formed its own Diversity Scholarship Program. Diversity surveys were conducted in 1999 and 2004. The initial study found that less than 5 percent of association professionals were diverse (race and gender were the targeted delineations). While there were no major demographic shifts in the 2004 study, a greater awareness and appreciation for diversity was evident.

In 2007, Association Forum pledged \$1 million over five years to increase racially diverse populations in associations by 5 percent. More than 50 associations joined the effort to inform the broader community and racially diverse potential employees about careers in associations. In 2011, after 11 years, the final Diversity Summit was held due to dwindling attendance and limited impact. The Diversity Scholars' program was expanded from one year to two, but eventually was discontinued.

In fall of 2014, the board reiterated that diversity is imperative to Association Forum's success and charged the Diversity and Inclusion Committee and staff to determine a plan to expand the impact of its work in the most measurable, effective and streamlined manner possible.

The answer? WE.

"Association Forum has always understood that it is an organization where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. That is the fundamental purpose for inclusion: to optimize for the maximum benefit from our increasingly diverse community.



Digital Extra

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With this focused effort, Association Forum will fully leverage its future potential to impact the association profession," Désy says.

The WE Committee defines diversity as including but not being limited to individual characteristics such as age, color, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, race, national origin, physical ability, political beliefs, religion, sexual orientation, marital status, language preference, socio-economic status and professional choices. It also considers diversity of thought, approach and experience. Inclusion is defined as the degree to which all members, staff, and stakeholders are included as integral and welcomed participants in the organization.

"To innovate and grow, we need to bring together the brightest minds from a variety of backgrounds," says Association Forum President and CEO Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE. "This means diversity not just in race, gender, age, sexuality, culture and ethnicity—it also means capturing variety in thought and experience among volunteers and staff. It is a business imperative. In the same way we routinely assess and re-assess staff, budgets and strategic priorities, we must consistently evaluate progress on diversity and inclusion."

'In All Your Getting, Get Understanding'

While diversity and inclusion progress is being made, there are still a ways to go, according to the National Center for Transgender Equality. Its 2012 *National Transgender Discrimination Survey* notes that 26 percent of transgendered people have lost a job due to bias and 50 percent were harassed on the job. Legal protection for transgendered individuals against workplace discrimination may be considered meager. While 18 states and Washington, D.C., identify transgendered individuals as a protected class, and 200 cities and counties have banned gender identity discrimination, those laws provide for only limited damages, according to NCTE. Protection at the federal level is also minimal. The Employment Non-Discrimination Act, a proposed federal bill that would make it expressly illegal to fire someone because of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, is pending.

"Besides Association Forum, there are probably some associations that are in the forefront of addressing the needs. And there are associations that specifically address this community," Blanchard says. "What I find most commonplace is that whatever education is presented—through mediums such as webinars, articles, in-person events—it lumps together the LGBT community. There may be better ways to separate transgender stories."

Blanchard also acknowledges that it's challenging to be "out" in the association community, and that, in his experi-

Burt Blanchard and his family share the struggles and choices they faced in "Growing Up Trans," which aired in July on PBS-Frontline. Watch it here: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/growing-up-trans/>

ence, many LGBT association professionals are uncomfortable speaking in front of their peers because a large segment of society is not accepting of diverse individuals.

"So the best place to start in educating the association community, especially about transgender individuals, is by stating the true facts of transgender life and progress from childhood to adulthood. There are experts in the field that can add to the conversation and would help the association community learn about it. And, if there are transgender people courageous enough to come to the table without feeling any trepidation, let's create that environment now.

"My favorite Proverb I live by is '...in all your getting, get understanding.' That can vary from acceptance to just acknowledging there are differences," Blanchard says. "That is where I am, personally. After all my education, after seeing what my child has gone through and the impact it's had on our family, the answer is simply 'to love.' That's what I implore our community to do." ■

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ABA Sets Diversity Bar

American Bar Association Executive Director Jack L. Rives is leading important changes to the organization's diversity efforts. The ABA Staff Diversity Plan, which helps ensure ABA has the right people to support its goals, was finalized in June 2011—one year after Rives joined the staff of 950

employees. A 17-person Staff Diversity Council, led by the ABA's chief diversity officer and three deputy diversity officers, manages the diversity plan and helps push for continuing progress. Following are highlights of the organization's work and results in this area:

- 46 percent of ABA's new hires are minorities—a 35 percent increase over three years.
- The executive team of senior managers is more diverse than ever. Women account for 55 percent of the group and 20 percent are minorities.
- The performance appraisal system was revised in 2014 to evaluate how well staff members incorporate diversity into their daily efforts.
- The number of staff diversity events have increased. In addition to ABA's long-observed Martin Luther King celebration, in January 2014, ABA recognized the 50th anniversaries of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act by holding a commemorative event featuring ABA officers and local leaders, and a proclamation from Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel that recognized the staff council's dedication to diversity matters. Last year, the ABA staff also has held activities to recognize World Down Syndrome Day in March and Hispanic Heritage Month in September. Washington, D.C., staff conducted a bake sale to benefit abuse survivors for Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Chicago staff took field trips to the DuSable Museum of African American History and the Mexican Fine Arts Museum. And, both offices held a special screening of the film "Milk" during LGBT Pride Month in June.
- ABA initiated a Spanish language club in Washington, D.C., and started two cross-entity affinity groups, enabling staff members to share their common interests and concerns online. One employee group is focused on women's issues and another highlights multicultural concerns. The Diversity Council provides expertise to those interested in forming other focus groups

"Diversity is one of the critical areas," Rives says. "You can't just have a nice slogan on the wall or nice words on the paper. ABA has four goals—one of them is to eliminate bias and enhance diversity. Together, ABA staff, leaders, and volunteer members have made notable progress for an inclusive culture at the association. As we continue to move forward with our many plans, a more diverse association will clearly be better equipped to overcome our challenges."

D&I Takes Off at United Airlines

During a Forum Forward Think Tank session, United Airlines' chief diversity officer Greg Jones explained how diversity and inclusion are closely inter-related, yet different. "Diversity is the mix. Inclusion is making the mix work," Jones says. "You can have diversity without inclusion, but you cannot have inclusion without diversity. If a company lacks inclusion, it is devaluing its employees in ways far beyond the issue of diversity."

Why D&I at United Airlines?

As a global airline serving 369 locations in 59 countries, United's 84,000 coworkers and millions of customers are from all different backgrounds. So knowing how to interact with people from all walks of life is important to the company. United defines diversity as: "Any level of difference that makes an individual unique, including ability, age, ethnicity, gender identification, race, sexual orientation and veteran's status. "Inclusion is how we leverage these differences to form genuine community and expand business opportunities," Jones says.

Xerox was a corporate diversity pioneer, forming an employee group in 1970 to build solidarity among black employees and ultimately make the organization more inclusive. Now, about 90 percent of Fortune 500 companies have employee resource groups—also called business resource groups or employee networks—for people of various affinities. At United, there are four such groups at this time: LGBT (EQUAL), multicultural (UNITE), veterans (United for Veterans), and women (ulImpact). These groups have three goals:

1. Reflect the diversity of the marketplace.
2. Develop and sustain a diverse and inclusive environment.
3. Maximize the diversity of customers and communities that United serves.

Each senior leader at United also has a diversity score card, which measures their diversity efforts. "The company encourages leaders' attendance at certain organizational events and shares the outcomes with United's Executive Diversity Council."

United has proven that its D&I efforts work. According to the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index, which evaluates the degree to which organizations embrace the LGBT community, United has achieved a perfect score (100 out of 100 points) for the last several years; most companies consider it a success to score 90 out of 100 points. The company is also tracking itself against the DiveristyInc.'s Top 50 list—essentially a list of Fortune 500 companies with the best diversity outcomes.

Strategies That Drive Outcomes

For organizations trying to move beyond compliance and "the right thing to do," Jones says it takes a strong D&I leader, support from senior leadership and active employee resource groups. The D&I leader must demonstrate influence and be responsible for the culture movement as well as aligning that movement with the business. The role of senior leadership is to set the tone for inclusive dialogue as well as listen and respond to employees. The role of the employee groups is to teach the organization and align their missions with the business. Other strategies:

- Develop leaders' skills and capabilities to build and lead diverse teams and bring out the best in each individual.
- Ensure each employee feels valued and comfortable bringing his or her full self to work.
- Grow brand awareness among demographics that are not familiar with United; Invest financial and human resources to develop brand loyalty in diverse markets.
- Ensure United's employees represent the communities and marketplace it serves; Support innovation by supporting diverse workgroups.

"The main reason why diversity fails or slips is leadership," Jones says. "We're getting so politically correct that people are afraid to have conversations for fear of feeling bad or guilty. People are afraid. They don't want to offend. They don't want to be labeled an 'ist,' such as 'sexist,' 'ageist,' 'racist.' But these conversations are necessary and developmental. If leaders can engage with people who are different than them, then they are expanding their leadership portfolio.

"I'm trying to challenge leaders of the organization that until they know how to build a diverse team, value them and maximize their performance, they have a growth opportunity as a leader."

How can organizations change the conversation about diversity and inclusion? "Position D&I as a leadership competency," Jones says. "A leader builds a diverse team, maximizes the performance of a diverse team, and understands the nuances of diversity in his or her market. More than half of United's executives have gone through a diversity and inclusion leadership session...We're not trying to change beliefs—we're trying to change behaviors in the workplace."

