



EMBRACING DEI: A COMPANY GUIDE TO DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

The chair and vice chair of TRSA's DEI Committee describe the 'transformative journey' of implementing DEI in the workplace

By *Kortney Overzet and Molly Ruiz*

In today's increasingly diverse and interconnected world, fostering an inclusive and equitable workplace is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic advantage. Embracing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) can lead to increased creativity, productivity and innovation in organizations. However, embarking on this journey brings its own challenges. To provide laundry operators and supplier partners with guidance in navigating your organization's DEI journey, we reviewed key elements of DEI with various professionals who've undertaken this journey to grow their understanding of DEI and the impact it's had on their organizations.

Each of the individuals we talked with emphasized that to successfully embrace DEI, a commitment to continuous learning is a must. This education can come in many different ways, including education about DEI issues and marginalized communities, seeking opportunities to engage with people from diverse backgrounds to learn from their experiences and perspectives, or more inward reflection through challenging your own biases and prejudices, actively practice empathy, and speaking up against discrimination and bias.

It's important to remember that this is not a "check the box" type of educational journey, but rather a continued evolution of learning about others' challenges and a self-reflection of your opportunities for acceptance and

becoming an ally or advocate for others. Additionally, when first entering into your DEI journey, it may be hard to know where to start. In the early stages of embracing and learning about DEI, networking groups, round tables, and in-person events can be instrumental in facilitating continued learning, offering opportunities to gain insights from various industries, backgrounds and experiences. We've gathered some learning materials, references and links on our DEI Committee website at bit.ly/EquityFence.

Several organizations have demonstrated success in transforming their cultures to embrace DEI and Belonging. These include Qurate Retail Group, Microsoft, Intel, Proctor & Gamble, Salesforce and Accenture as notable examples that have driven DEI initiatives throughout their talent landscapes. However, you don't need to be a Fortune 500 company to place DEI and Belonging as priorities.

GET STARTED; OVERCOME OBSTACLES

One key factor in any company that has success in their DEI journey has been securing buy-in from executives and leaders. Without demonstrating the support and dedication to DEI from a leadership, ownership and executive level, employees will not feel that this effort is anything more than a "flavor of the week." What's more, fostering internal conversations about employees' desires for engagement and promoting open communication on DEI topics aids organizations in fostering buy-in from all levels of the company. It is extremely important to involve every employee at every level in DEI initiatives. Whether it's in fostering a safe space for conversations (e.g., with an Employee Resource Group), hosting lunch-and-learns on key topics, or discussing DEI issues in company updates, you must ensure that everyone is involved with the organizational DEI strategy. If you are feeling stuck in how to formulate your DEI strategy and communicate it

to your organization, you also can benefit from collaborating with educational and state entities that have already created DEI guides. These can also be beneficial.

Educating employees about DEI could pose roadblocks that demand consistent effort and commitment. Lack of leadership buy-in, unconscious bias, resistance to change, limited access to opportunities for growth and advancement and insufficient resources can hinder progress. Additionally, DEI is a complex journey that requires constant revisiting and adaptation as goals and circumstances evolve. It isn't easy, but it is a fulfilling and rewarding journey.

To drive impactful DEI initiatives in organizations, and overcome roadblocks, leaders should provide continuous DEI training on topics such as unconscious bias, microaggressions, cultural competency and "allyship," i.e., organized efforts by groups of people to advance the interests of marginalized people in the organization and in the society at large. Leading by example and celebrating the diversity of employees, highlighting their unique perspectives and experiences also can foster inclusivity.

Evaluating progress regularly and making necessary pivots are crucial steps to success. Breaking down DEI education into bite-sized segments, initially focusing on three main skills, and encouraging small moves forward can make it easier for employees to absorb and integrate DEI principles into their daily interactions.

Additionally, implementing group-mentoring sessions, during which participants can openly discuss DEI topics and seek support from each other, can create a safe space for learning and growth. Integrating DEI efforts into existing programs, such as "Emerging Leaders," "Leadership Development," and "Member Engagement," can reinforce the importance of inclusivity and acceptance.

Embracing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is a transformative journey that requires commitment, continuous learning and consistent effort. By fostering open communication, providing education and celebrating the staff diversity, organizations can create a workplace culture where everyone feels valued, respected and empowered. Overcoming roadblocks and driving DEI initiatives will not only benefit

employees, but they can lead to greater organization success. **IS**

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Left to Right: Todd Shields, Board President; Cara Marsh-Rhodes, Board Treasurer; and Antonio Casillas, General Manager