

## Innovative Ways to Diversify Your Workforce

In health care, a diverse staff can provide great value in meeting the needs of patients from a wide range of cultures — a lesson that carries over to other industries.

An immense challenge lies before the nation's health care sector: diversifying its workforce. A 2012 study by executive search firm Witt/Kieffer, "Diversity as a Business Builder in Healthcare," found that diversity is lacking in health care leadership. This is unfortunate because industry leaders surveyed in the study believe diversity in the workplace improves patient satisfaction and clinical outcomes. This impact on the customer likely has similar effects in other industries.

A key tenet of excellent health care — like any service-oriented industry that meets a customer's needs — is the caregiver's ability to understand patients' needs. This includes their diverse cultural needs — since, as the study noted, minorities account for 98 percent of the population growth in the nation's largest metropolitan areas during the last decade.

It's all part of knowing who you serve. Where does a patient, or customer, come from? How about their culture, values and sensitivities? Are these just as important to how we meet their needs?

Knowing all this begins with hiring — and promoting — employees whose cultural backgrounds represent the patients the organization serves. This takes a commitment both internally with employees and externally in the communities served. Companies seeking to do this should take the following 10 steps:

1. Embrace diversity: This seems basic, but it's critical and worth noting first. A diverse workforce is a true competitive advantage. Promoting a culture that values employees for unique skills, experiences and perspectives distinguishes an organization as all-inclusive, relevant and truly understanding of what customers want and need. In essence, it is a treasure trove of customer and business intelligence.

Internally, the more leaders understand and respect their employees' differences, the easier it will be to make seemingly difficult conversations more comfortable. This is critical when serving a religiously, culturally or otherwise diverse customer base.

2. Create a visual of your team: Keep ethnicity and gender data on hand so that hiring managers can create a visual picture of the individuals on each team. When numbers and percentages fail, this mental image of who is on the team can help senior leadership see where diverse populations are underrepresented or underutilized and especially compare them to the customer population. Of course, this comes with the need to reassure the team that only the most qualified candidates should be hired.

3. Build a hit list of superstars: Ask existing staff to refer potential recruits, since great employees usually associate with one another or can easily spot a top performer. Not hiring immediately? Collect and build a list of superstars to hire in the future. Keep in touch with them in the meantime.

4. Network with diverse organizations: Develop relationships with ethnically diverse professional associations and organizations, as well as local community boards and civic associations. Attend their conferences, speak at their functions and reciprocate by inviting them to company open houses and job fairs. Also, connect with vendors and suppliers who share a value for diversity and alert them to job openings for which they may have a candidate.

5. Set diversity expectations with recruiters: When using outside recruiters, ask for a diverse set of candidates and examples of high-caliber recruits they have recently placed. If they cannot easily rattle off a litany of names, then find another recruiter.

6. Invite staff into the inner circle: Create an environment of inclusion where all staff members feel valued, embrace the company's mission, feel part of its vision and are fully tuned in with the organization's business strategy. Help them understand just how important diversity is to serving customers best and that every individual is a big part of that. It's easy to lose top performers because they feel detached, especially in large organizations.

7. Let your employees shine: Acknowledge — and celebrate — your staff's accomplishments and set them up for success. This small step goes a long way in engaging employees and encouraging them to go the extra mile. Give opportunities for employees to demonstrate excellence. Assign them projects that suit their skills, recognize their achievement and celebrate it in a public way — either inside or outside your organization. In this recognition, make a point to celebrate them as a diverse individual, not just their work.

8. Mentor and shadow: The best learning happens in the field, so develop a mentoring and shadowing program that pairs hiring managers with employees of different cultural or ethnic backgrounds or genders. This creates a trusted, educational environment where employees can feel safe about asking questions regarding different backgrounds, and also lets them see different cultural styles at work.

9. Achieve employees' dreams: Encourage leaders to know the career desires of the staff who report to them. This puts them in the position to always know when a promotional opportunity might be the best fit and help further their career goals. It also gives the opportunity to challenge employees with new assignments that broaden their skills and expose them to different chances for success.

10. Over-communicate: Relationships matter, and they are only built with repeated communication. This could mean deliberately initiating a conversation with an employee, listening to what they say, providing feedback and calling their attention to your follow through. Or, it can mean brief acknowledgements of their work, which add up and make a difference over time. On the other end of the spectrum, it should take the form of an internal communications plan that, from an HR perspective, tells employees what positions are open, how to apply, updates from HR, etc.

A key to all these steps is relationships — inside and out — with those already hired and targeted to join your team. No matter the industry — be it health care or another — businesses can use focused attention on recruitment of minorities as a way to build culture, morale and the strength of the entire business.

