

PRINCIPAL ISSUES

The Unspoken Advantage

Making the case for effectively utilizing diversity

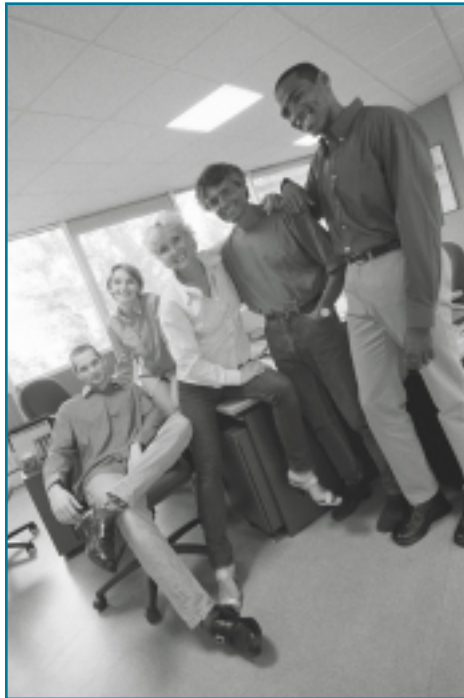
by: Joanne L. Smikle, www.smiklespeaks.com

Every dealership in the world is looking for ways to gain a competitive advantage. Let's face it, whether you are a tiny mom-and-pop shop in small-town USA, a dealership with several branches throughout a region or part of a multinational conglomerate, wherever you are and whatever form your organization takes, you want to leverage your strengths to gain market share. An often overlooked strategy that accomplishes this end is managing diversity. I'm not talking about affirmative action or the quotas of old. I'm talking about recognizing and effectively utilizing the diversity within the organization and then channeling those same skills to reach diverse customer populations.

This is one of those sensitive subjects that many shy away from. It is an emotionally and politically charged topic. Few of us are neutral on this one. It is a reflection of our earliest learning; those teachings that still shape our biases and assumptions. In this article we are going to get beyond the discomfort and address the business realities of diversity. And, we will do it without attacking any group. The funny thing about the subject of inclusion is that it is often used to divide and destroy. But the real aim is to build well-worn bridges between seemingly different groups of people. This article introduces five business-based steps that make a compelling case for dealing with diversity in your dealership.

Defining Diversity

Before introducing the action steps, let's agree on a definition of diversity. In short, it is all of the ways in which we are the same and all of the ways in which we are different. It necessarily encompasses race, gender, national origin, religion and language. It also encompasses sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education and disability. Managing diversity in the workplace requires leaders to create systems, from marketing and business development to customer relationship management and customer service, that work well for all sorts of people. This ultimately produces better results for the entire enterprise.



Operating from a broader definition allows us to acknowledge the endless opportunities that diversity offers the enterprise. When we get beyond our silent reservations and become open to the limitless possibilities available to the company, we approach the topic with the appropriate attitude.

The Five Action Steps

There are five action steps that will enable you to use diversity to create a stronger organization. These strategies will help you recruit and retain the absolute best, tap different customer bases and create a reputation as an employer of choice. These steps will also help you approach diversity from a structured business perspective.

Action Step 1: Create a Philosophy of Inclusion.

One of the most common mistakes companies make is to conduct training or to develop strategies without really thinking about what diversity means in their organizational contexts. Your unique approach to diversity should be supported by a clear philosophy that states your position on inclusion. This need not be a lofty, philosophical treatise. Rather, it should be a clear, concise statement of your position on inclusion. It should define the "what" and the "why" of diversity in your company. This should be a collaborative activity that includes input from different levels. Mind you, many companies waste countless man hours drafting the perfect statement and never get to practical implementation. Your statement can be as simple as, "We at XYZ Office Equipment respect the diversity presented by our employees and customers. We make that respect real by being courteous, competent and kind." No need to write the great American novel, just get to the point.

Action Step 2: Integrate your Diversity Philosophy Into Every Aspect of the Business.

Having a really great philosophy that includes each and every member of the organization is an excellent start. The next step is to

make that philosophy the guide for all of your activities. Consider diversity when tapping new markets. Consider diversity when designing your next advertising campaign.

One of the most meaningful ways to integrate your philosophy is to include it as an integral part of your performance measurement system. Have categories that measure how well managers lead diverse teams, how well front-line staff interact with diverse customers and how aggressively salespeople market to nontraditional markets. This will give your philosophy meaning. Employees will understand that you are very serious about creating inclusion.

Action Step 3: Use a Process to Ignite Diverse Work Teams.

Positive synergy on work teams is not automatic. You are responsible for successfully pulling together different people and encouraging them to share their divergent perspectives for the good of the organization. Before putting teams together, think seriously about how you can merge diverse groups of people. When I say “diverse groups of people,” I mean not only the categories mentioned previously, but also people who have different styles and approaches to work, people who represent different functional areas and expertise.

Provide them with the tools for collaboration. They need to understand team processes, roles and responsibilities. Additionally, they need to have effective tools for managing the inevitable conflicts. While it may be easier to function in silos, you have to break that habit if you are to use diversity to your advantage. Expect discomfort at first. As the team members progress, they will develop the ability to manage their conflicts. One word of caution — these teams, like any other teams, need to have clear objectives and measurable deliverables that are attached to deadlines.

Action Step 4: Create Community.

Create opportunities to celebrate with colleagues and customers. Some companies follow the calendar and celebrate national, religious and ethnic holidays. Other companies make their own reasons for celebration — reaching a goal, anniversaries, launch of new products. Whatever the reason, use celebration as a way of creating a sense of belonging for all employees.

Creating community goes beyond celebration. Be sure that all employees, whether management or not, are in the habit of being as respectful with each other as they would be with customers. Develop a zero-tolerance policy for racist, sexist, religious or other jokes that could be hurtful.

Create a culture where support is the norm. Do this by being tuned into developments in each others' lives. I am not suggesting that everyone become Nosy Nellie, just that people become aware of the very real human pressures we all face. A friend's husband was

diagnosed with cancer and needed lots of blood to get through the many surgeries. Her boss closed down the office for several hours so that anyone who wanted to could donate blood. Much to his surprise, the entire office donated. They all pitched in because a sense of community was already in place.

Action Step 5: Communicate Across Lines of Difference.

It is awfully tempting to be reticent when differences pop up. It is easy to dismiss differences or try to work around them instead of addressing the real issues. However, the trick to really building bridges is to communicate in spite of the discomfort. Probe. Get additional information. Find out about the other person's perspective. If the subject is too sensitive, table the discussion for a later date.

There are a few communication tools that will help when trying to build bridges. The first is to think seriously about the message before sending it. Engage mind and heart before mouth. The second is to clear up uncertainties by asking questions. Not those antagonizing, devil's advocate questions; instead, ask genuine questions that show your interest in building a better understanding. The third is to weigh your response before delivering it. Rather than flying on the steam of emotion, think about what you would really like to say and then say it in a way that preserves the relationship. The fourth and final communication tool is to pay attention to your nonverbal signals. Are you maintaining appropriate eye contact? What is your posture saying? Are you distracted? All of these nonverbal cues send messages that may create further discord.

Summary

Understanding diversity from a business perspective is the first step in building an inclusive organization able to serve a wide range of customers, tap new markets and retain the best employees in the field. Move from understanding to action with the steps detailed in this article. Customize each step so that it fits your unique workplace. Expect some resistance. Oddly enough, these concepts are still foreign in many organizations. Resistance does not always imply unwillingness to adapt; instead, you will just have to show resisters how diversity benefits the bottom line. Highlight the gains from new markets, the reduction in tension because of better understanding and, of course, the higher levels of customer satisfaction. These are the very real by-products of well-planned, thoughtfully executed diversity initiatives. ■

Joanne L. Smikle is the author of “Calamity-Free Collaboration: Making Teamwork WORK!” A speaker, consultant and trainer, Smikle can be reached at (301) 596-2822 or by e-mail at Joanne@smiklespeaks.com.

