



Diversity Initiatives at a Consulting Company

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ABSTRACT

Diversity is an extremely hot topic today, and with good reason. A tremendous number of articles on industry initiatives, court cases, and human-interest stories are appearing in newspapers, business journals, and on the Internet. It is clear that the American people, businesses and consumers alike, are demanding diversity and minority opportunity in America's workplace. WESTON® recognizes the importance of a diverse workforce. Aside from the benefits that diversity provides to the company, it is a requirement for entering into many of our business contracts and helps to build healthy long-term relationships with our clients. To support our diversity initiative, WESTON established the Diversity Forum to address the challenges that we face.

The Diversity Forum is in the process of developing ideas and approaches to increasing diversity in our workplace. We have various active subcommittees involved in "barrier busting" and recruitment. We are seeking input from our employees regarding barriers they encounter in the workplace so that we can obtain a balanced perspective. We are prioritizing those barriers we have identified and developing methods to lessen or eliminate them in entry-level through management positions. We have adopted flexible work time policies and are continuing to look for ways to increase diversity and minority opportunity.

This ongoing process continues to unfold discoveries and realizations that will ultimately lead to improvements. We would like the opportunity to share our experiences, including our successful and not-so-successful stories, with the hope that our experiences will help others in their quest for a diverse, harmonious, and profitable business in this new millennium.

INTRODUCTION

Roy F. Weston, Inc. (WESTON®), founded in 1957, is a consulting firm and service provider in the environmental and infrastructure redevelopment field. WESTON's staff of 2,000 employees represents a variety of disciplines, including chemical, civil, and environmental engineering, biosciences, computer and information sciences, computer simulation and modeling, construction management, ecology, geosciences, hazardous waste management, occupational health and safety, toxicology, and water resource management. Since its inception, WESTON has enjoyed a history of dedicated, long-term employees and success in the public, private, and government sectors.

About 3 years ago, WESTON's management team recognized that morale and team spirit within the workplace had reached a low point and that the company needed to take a closer look at the dynamics within the workplace. Correspondingly, the management team embarked on a mission to collect data from those employees who could help identify real and perceived issues that may need to be addressed. The results of this exercise resulted in a number of "Work Out" groups that focused on issues identified in the data collection effort. One of the groups was assigned to review employee retention at WESTON.

As a part of its agenda, the Work Out Group gathered statistics regarding diversity within WESTON and concluded that the company's diversity statistics are fairly consistent with similar types of technical companies. Unfortunately, one of the common traits in this type of company is low retention of minorities, ultimately resulting in fewer minorities in higher positions. WESTON, like other technical companies, hires a large percentage of minorities for junior level positions but loses many of these employees before they have had a chance to advance their careers within the organization.

WESTON's management team understands that diversity within WESTON is not only important, but also essential, for the success of our business and improvement of morale within the company. With proper attention to diversity, statistics at WESTON should outperform the norm within technology-based companies. .

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Diversity Forum Mission Statement

To clearly focus the efforts of the group, the Diversity Forum prepared the following mission statement:

"To nurture a culturally diverse workforce that strengthens WESTON's business position and contributes to our corporate mission of developing to last."

The mission statement embodies the basic premise that diversity initiatives must lead to improved business profitability and longevity in order to be accepted and practiced within the workplace. Thus, it is important to establish and communicate the business case for diversity early in the process.

Highlights of the Diversity Forum

In early 1999, the concept of a Diversity Forum was presented to the Board of Directors, and received strong support. The Diversity Forum was launched in June 1999 as an outcome of the Work Out for Keeping and Retaining Employees. The participants are from WESTON's East Division and other divisions located at the company's headquarters in West Chester, Pennsylvania. This geographical coverage provides a large amount of company coverage based on the organization's population density and

additional functions within its West Chester location. The Diversity Forum also offers a solid pilot program that can be used as the model for similar forums throughout the organization and its offices across the country.

At this time, the Forum is focusing primarily on the recruitment, retention, and advancement of women for two reasons. First, we need to make our initiatives manageable since the Forum is not experienced in diversity initiatives. Second, we can achieve more input with more significant results because there are more women at WESTON. It is the Forum's objective to expand its efforts to include other minorities in the near future.

The Diversity Forum meets monthly to discuss the various initiatives underway. Designated committees address each of the initiatives. Currently the active committees include:

- Recruitment
- Mentoring
- Barrier Reduction
- Communications.

The Forum publishes a quarterly newsletter with updates on the status of the initiatives as well as other information and ideas regarding the issues associated with diversity. Company employees may access Diversity Forum information, newsletters, Internet links, etc. through the WESTON intranet.

In 2000, WESTON joined *Catalyst*, a non-profit organization devoted to assisting companies in their mission for improved business results through diversity initiatives. Catalyst resources, such as printed studies, one-on-one communications, and company-specific services, help guide the Diversity Forum in addressing its initiatives. Catalyst expertise allows the Forum to address specific initiatives in a proven, effective manner (e.g., the collection of meaningful data, correct data interpretation, and developing initiatives to address issues).

Framework Based on Core Principles

Essentially a successful business initiative must be based on core principles. For the Diversity Forum, our principles include:

1. Establish a strong foundation based on leadership and a clear business case.
2. Build a fact base of current barriers and opportunities for women and other constituencies.
3. Develop and implement solutions and measurement systems.

Our progress in moving through these principles is ongoing. We have obtained leadership support and developed a business case for diversity in the workforce. For WESTON, diversity is essential to:

- Differentiate WESTON as a preferred employer and supplier.
- Expand our candidate pool.
- Meet our clients' demands.
- Broaden our perspective and increase our problem-solving abilities.

WESTON strives to be a preferred employer and supplier to attract and retain talented individuals and to better meet the needs of our clients. Minority groups frequently seek employers with diversity initiatives and practices in place. Also, clients frequently seek service providers that offer diverse staffing to better match their needs and approaches to problem solving.

By welcoming diversity, we have a larger candidate pool, which is becoming increasingly important with the shortage of talented professionals available in the marketplace. To maintain a high-talent workforce, we need to reach out to more groups.

Many of our clients have specific demands regarding diversity. The Federal Government requires compliance with the Equal Employment Opportunity laws. The Army Corps of Engineers, Air Force, Navy, and Environmental Protection Agency have diversity requirements for subcontractors.

A diverse population within a workforce provides a broader perspective, increasing our problem-solving abilities. Through cultural conditioning, various populations may tackle challenges differently. These variations emphasize the need to provide a diverse perspective to our clients.

CURRENT INITIATIVES/COMMITTEES

Recruitment

The Recruitment Committee is actively involved in recruiting minorities for employment at WESTON. Recruitment of minorities is addressed through several initiatives:

- Attendance at Job Fairs and Employer Recruiting Events at colleges representative of a diverse population
- Scheduling diverse staff to attend these functions
- Networking with groups representing diversity within universities and professional groups.

WESTON has targeted relationships with Morgan State University, Immaculata College, University of Massachusetts at Lowell, and Massachusetts Maritime Academy,

institutions that have the potential to provide diverse employment candidates. We are currently working on building more relationships outside these colleges to increase our networking and improve our results. Our diversity recruitment program is continuously evaluated for improvement and update.

Mentoring

WESTON has established a separate mission statement for its mentoring program:

“To ensure that all employees have access to professional development assistance critical to career growth by establishing a mentoring program designed to contribute to employee knowledge, morale, motivation, and retention.”

To address specific diversity needs in the mentoring program, the traditional mentoring approach needs to be redefined. This program must consider that there are few role models for women and minorities. Also, the mentoring program should address the issue that women and minorities experience a slower ascent into management.

A successful mentoring program must incorporate the following elements:

- Equitable opportunity for participation
- Realistic expectations
- Use of Best Practices (proven methods).

To embark on our mission of developing an effective mentoring program, the committee is first establishing whether there is sufficient interest in mentoring. From surveying within the workplace, this interest is apparent. Secondly, the committee is developing a plan to design and implement a formal WESTON Mentoring Program. To work toward this endeavor, the committee is soliciting “Real Life” mentoring experience and success stories to incorporate into WESTON’s plan.

Barrier Reduction

The Barrier Group, formed in late 1999, has adopted the following mission statement:

“To identify barriers that WESTON women and other constituencies face and to reduce or eliminate those barriers.”

This group meets about once per month and is open to all interested parties. The group actively solicits input and participation from minorities and non-minorities alike.

The Barrier Group reviewed available literature^{1,2} on typical barriers faced by women and minorities in the workplace. Based on this review, the group developed a listing of

barriers, and prepared a survey for electronic distribution to the employees in the Eastern Division or located at the West Chester campus. This survey asked participants to select the three biggest barriers to women and minorities in the workplace. One hundred thirty one (131) men and 128 females responded to the survey.

Female employees selected the following as the top barriers in the workplace:

1. Lack of a mentoring program
2. Perceived risk of advancing women
3. Work style double standard

Males also selected “lack of a mentoring program” as the primary barrier to women and minorities in the workplace. However, they identified other barriers as having secondary and tertiary importance within the workplace. The top barriers include:

1. Lack of a mentoring program
2. Lack of management support
3. Ineffective networking

The Barrier Group is currently working on the next step of reducing barriers in the workplace and generating a list of ideas that could minimize some of those barriers. Each idea will be evaluated based on its potential to lessen one or more barriers and the ease of implementation. Eventually, the group anticipates that the prioritized list of ideas will be used as an action plan to implement change within our organization.

Communications

The Diversity Forum publishes and internally distributes a quarterly newsletter to share diversity information, ideas, and concerns among East Division and West Chester personnel. Specifically, the newsletter is intended to:

- Disseminate diversity information
- Share concerns
- Highlight diversity progress and accomplishments
- Serve as a model for the entire company and our clients.

The Forum also maintains a site on WESTON’s intranet to provide diversity-related information, an archive of newsletters, suggested sources of additional information, and links to Internet sites.

The Diversity Forum sponsored a diversity kick-off meeting to orient WESTON employees on its diversity efforts and accomplishments to date. This meeting, held on 30 October 2000, was conducted in the campus library with remote offices patched into the meeting through NetMeeting software. The meeting proved to be a stimulating and worthwhile event. The Diversity Forum efforts were met with both support and

speculation, as would be expected. The meeting charged the Diversity Forum with renewed energy to continue its efforts in nurturing a culturally diverse workforce.

CONCLUSIONS

WESTON has taken a big step in meeting its Diversity Mission Statement. The accomplishments to date include:

- Senior Management has committed to supporting the mission.
- The Forum has established a strong foundation based on leadership and a clear business case.
- WESTON has built a fact base of current barriers and opportunities for women and other minorities.
- We are in the process of developing and implementing solutions and measurement systems.

After all, diversity is more than just gender, more than just race, more than just culture...it's good business.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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KEYWORDS

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