

**Yvonne:** In last month's edition of Diversity News, we talked with Georgia Coffey, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for VA's Office of Diversity Management and Equal Employment Opportunity, who asked all VA employees to join our office in an ongoing partnership to help bring diversity and inclusion to VA.

**Thomas:** Ms. Coffey is just one member of our VA human resources and administration, or HR&A, leadership team that is committed to establishing a diverse and inclusive VA.

Willie Hensley is the Acting Assistant Secretary for HR&A.

In this role, Mr. Hensley serves as principal advisor to the Secretary, his executive staff, and the Department's human resources managers and practitioners on matters pertaining to human resources; labor-management relations; diversity management and equal employment opportunity; discrimination complaint processing (resolution management); employee health and safety; workers' compensation; and VA Central Office administration.

**Yvonne:** Meghan Flanz, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Labor-Management Relations, or LMR, is also a member of the HR&A leadership team.

LMR promotes cooperative labor-management relationships to ensure that the Department can effectively manage its workforce while creating a positive work environment for employees and meeting its labor relations obligations.

**Thomas:** Another member of our HR&A leadership team is Ralph Torres, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Resolution Management, or ORM.

ORM is the organization within VA with the responsibility for providing a variety of services and programs to prevent, resolve, and process workplace disputes in a timely and high quality manner.

**Yvonne:** In this month's edition of Diversity News, Ms. Coffey held a round table discussion with these HR&A leaders to discuss diversity management issues facing VA today.

**Georgia:** You know, you can't open a newspaper these days without seeing the evidence of the globalization of our American economy. In addition to that, the census tell us that, probably no later than 2040, we're going to be a nation that no longer is characterized by a single demographic majority. Now, all these things really have import and impact for us as leaders in Federal government and I'd like to hear what your perspectives are about what are the challenges and opportunities that these changes pose to us here in VA today. Willie, what are your thoughts?

**Willie:** Well, Georgia, I think one of the areas where we can certainly do a little bit more work has to do with helping our employees expand their definition of diversity. For example, a lot of our employees are focused on the old traditional definition which links to race, ethnicity, gender, and the like. I believe we need to turn toward today's workforce in VA, take a look at the multigenerational, the multicultural, the blended workforce we have, and some of the challenges that bring to management and how we can deal with that as a Department.

**Georgia:** Yeah, that's actually very interesting, Willie, because I know—coming to VA—I wanted to introduce the concept of the business case for diversity and diversity of thought and how that plays into our own operations. Meghan, with labor and management relations, I'm sure there's lots of ripe areas for opportunities in this area.

**Meghan:** Absolutely. Labor-relations is really about relationships and relationships are either good and they're productive and they lead to the kind of discussion and collaboration we need to have as managers with labor unions or they're not so good and they're not so productive. The way diversity plays into that is, you know, we bring—each of us to the table, no matter who we're talking to—our own backgrounds, our culture, our generational differences, our gender differences, and the more we can do to facilitate employees' understanding of one another's differences, celebrate those differences as opposed to allowing them to create chasms between us, the better our relationships are.

**Georgia:** That's great and now implicit in all this is that there is potential for conflict. The minute you bring any two different types of folks together into one organization there's always going to be that potential. Ralph, your office deals a lot in resolving that conflict: any thoughts from your perspective on dealing with this?

**Ralph:** Well, there's no doubt that because of the reasons that you mentioned earlier that the VA is going to see a lot of change in the makeup of its workforce in the very near future and with change, conflict is unavoidable. And, in fact, we don't talk about conflict prevention in the Office of Resolution Management; we talk about conflict management. And so, with a diverse workforce, we will have our challenges in terms of getting people from different backgrounds to work together effectively and that's where we will concentrate on the techniques and the tools to get people to manage their differences: ADR, mediation, and so on.

**Georgia:** Yeah, I was going to mention the ADR program because I've since learned that ADR here in VA—alternative dispute resolution—is becoming increasingly effective. Not only is it increasingly effective once used, but more and more managers are now taking the opportunity to participate in this process. Tell me a little bit about that and what are the advantages to managers and employees for participating in ADR?

**Ralph:** Well, there's no doubt about it, we are participating in that process more and more every day. Five years ago, ADR participation was at about five percent. We're now at 45 percent participation and this is in the context of EEO complaints that get filed. What we're finding is that the earlier you get people involved in conflict management techniques (ADR, mediation, and the alternatives), the faster you resolve those differences of opinion, the faster you get people back into the workplace and productive, and the less money it costs the agency to manage the workplace.

**Georgia:** Again, that business case. It's certainly a financial case, but I think it's even more than that, too. I mean, kind of like you were saying, Meghan, that the relationships are what is key here. Willie, any other specific strategies that we here in VA can look forward to coming out of HR&A to address these and other issues related to diversity management?

**Willie:** Well, I think one of the things that we've done that's been quite successful is our special emphasis programs. They've done just a great job in helping employees understand the differences among our employees. Where the opportunity for growth is in that area is making sure that the people who attend those kinds of events are not just the people who are being recognized, the ones who are celebrating special emphasis or Hispanic or African American Heritage Month, that we draw into the pool those people who can benefit from understanding and appreciating the difference among our employees.

**Georgia:** You know, it's funny. More and more I'm seeing, not only in the Federal government, really it started in the private sector, that we're hearing the concept of inclusion as a separate concept to diversity. Diversity, as you said Meghan, is celebrating our differences. Inclusion is now leveraging those differences and making them work toward the benefit of VA. Are you seeing any more of that in your experience doing labor-management negotiations? Is that coming up as an issue in some of discussions?

**Meghan:** Not by that term, but yes. We're finding that more and more the national labor and management leaders, in particular, need to be attuned to sort of conflict coaching which, one portion of which, involves identifying when it is our cultural differences, our language differences, our backgrounds are keeping us from communicating properly and so the more that we understand about those differences, the better we can make sure that the differences don't keep us from doing our work properly and can allow us to humanize one another rather than demonizing one another across the table, which can sometimes happen otherwise.

**Georgia:** Why do you think all this is important? Why are we spending this time, even today coming together to have this discussion? What difference does it make to VA to have a diverse, inclusive environment?

**Willie:** Well, I think it makes a big difference. We need to draw on the strength and talent of our society and the men and women who have served this great nation come from that society and we need to be able to demonstrate our commitment to diversity by making sure that when they come to us they see people who look like them and, I believe, it is an opportunity for us to draw on just the very strength of our Nation when we take a look at how to attract to VA the talent, the skills, the people with the knowledge that is needed in order for us to meet this great and noble mission.

**Georgia:** I think that is perfectly said. Willie, as you know, you and I are soon going to be embarking on a new initiative which is our diversity advisory council.

**Willie:** Right.

**Georgia:** We're standing that up soon and one of the things that I know we're both looking forward to is for the first time there will be a structure, a VA-wide structure that will serve as a forum to discuss these kinds of diversity management issues, and labor issues, and all sorts of issues. Any other initiatives going on in any of your areas that you want to highlight for our audience today as to how we can create an inclusive work environment? We've talked about a few today; anything else that any of you would like to share?

**Ralph:** Well, from the perspective of conflict management, what ORM wants to do is to begin earlier in managing the disagreements that occur, not waiting until a complaint has been filed or until a disagreement has gotten out of hand, but to provide managers and employees the tools they need to sit down together the first moment a problem arises to try to work their differences out.

**Georgia:** Early conflict resolution.

**Ralph:** Absolutely; through training, through the, and giving them the ability to have those crucial conversations that they need to have to keep themselves focused on the job at hand.

**Georgia:** Now, your office actually does do a training module on having crucial conversations.

**Ralph:** Crucial confrontations...

**Georgia:** Confrontations.

**Ralph:** ...and crucial conversations and they're both premised on the fact that if you get it, if you get at the issues early on you have a much higher probability of getting them resolved and we have a workplace ADR program that targets conflicts at the first possible moment and we're finding that that's about 78 percent effective in getting the conflicts resolved. If you wait until a complaint or

a grievance is filed the effectiveness of ADR and mediation drops to below 50 percent.

**Meghan:** My office is actually working with Ralph's office to develop a conflict coaching curriculum that I and the national labor partners through the National Partnership Council will all take. We will learn to be conflict coaches. My idea is to try to get at an environment. Before there's even a particular conflict or grievance that has a reason, we generally hear what Ralph and I sometimes call "noise" at a particular facility where the local parties (labor and management) have just forgotten how to communicate with one another productively and so instead you get not even necessarily higher grievance rates, higher EEO complaints, but just discord. And my idea is to be able to send in a national labor management team (someone from the national union, someone from my office or from the administration in question) to go in early and facilitate a mediation and facilitation session that will allow those local parties to identify what the impediments are to successful communication and ideally fix it before it develops into a grievance or an EEO complaint.

**Georgia:** That's outstanding. Any other major issues, whether it's in the area of EEO/diversity or not, Willie, that you'd like to share with us?

**Willie:** Well, I think one of the things that you have certainly focused the Department on is a strategic plan...diversity strategic plan. That's something that has not been a part of our agenda and I think is something that's going to pave the way for how we deal with diversity in the Department, not just today but in the future. We know a lot about our current workforce in terms of gaps, we know where the underrepresentation is. We know, and we maintain, very good statistical data on ADR and the outcomes as a result of getting our employees and management to the table. What we don't really have a lot of information about is what the workforce that we will draw from in the year 2020, 2030 will look like and how do we prepare those GS-9s, -11s, and -12s who will be managers during that timeframe to deal with some of the differences in that workforce, be it cultural differences or generational differences. And so I think your plan will give us a pathway for addressing those kinds of issues.

**Georgia:** Thanks for mentioning that, Willie, because we actually, we're working very hard on that right now and very soon, again through the diversity council, our stakeholders will have input into that, too. One of the things that you touched on, reminded me of a mentoring program that we'd like to get more involved in. We know that HR does do some mentoring programs as we speak. Again, we want to kind of expand these best practices for all of VA. That pipeline that you speak of is so important to make sure it's diverse and I think mentoring is one good way to do it.

Well, I think you can see that we have a lot of good ideas on the horizon. I look forward to working with all of you. We are absolutely a team here in this effort;

none of us can do it by ourselves. Thank you for your good thoughts and your good strategies and I look forward to working with you again.

**Thomas:** Diversity management certainly requires a team effort and we'll be updating you on some of these great ideas our HR&A leadership team mentioned, but that's all we have time for in this edition of Diversity News.

We appreciate your watching, and we hope you'll tune in again next month.

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Until next time...

**Yvonne and Thomas:** Have a GREAT month!