

Diversity News **January 2009**

Yvonne: On Friday, September 26th 2008, the Washington DC VA Medical Center presented the fourth session of its Executive Leadership Training Series, a program designed specifically to meet the needs of managers and supervisors in resolving conflict in the workplace.

Thomas: This two-hour session focused on cultural diversity and addressed the issue from several perspectives, including its advantages, its importance in healthcare, as well as overcoming challenges in dealing with a diverse workforce.

Thomas: The first panelist to speak was Georgia Coffey, Deputy Assistant Secretary for VA's then-Office of Diversity Management and Equal Employment Opportunity, which has since evolved to the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. Ms. Coffey talked about the business case for diversity.

Georgia: What I hope to convey to you today is that although each of you are in highly scientific fields, medical fields, biological fields, I can guarantee you that the issue of diversity is absolutely central to how well you can perform your jobs.

Georgia: By 2040, by all estimations from the Census Bureau, there will no longer be a single demographic majority—it just won't be. People of color will represent more than 50 percent of the nation and no one group will be able to claim the mantle of being in the majority. We will truly be a diverse organization and that's good news.

Georgia: The Diversity Research Network, a well-known, highly-respected organization that does a number of studies in the diversity arena and here's what they found, and I'm going to just distill it down to the final outcomes. Workforce diversity, in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, now I am talking about, is indeed positively associated—there is a positive correlation—between workforce diversity and business outcomes.

Georgia: Drilling down further, racial diversity in the workforce is positively associated with higher performance in organizations that integrate and leverage diverse perspectives. That is an important piece of the equation here. Diversity will not work—will not be effective in having these outcomes—unless you have the conditions in place that welcome diverse points of view. Now we're starting to get into the link between diverse thought, intellectual diversity, and our human diversity—our race, gender, ethnicity.

Georgia: Just in September, the Journal of American Medicine Association, JAMA, put out a study; I encourage you to look at it. In fact, it references one of our own folks here in VA. A study was done, led by a UCLA team, that showed that graduates—health professional graduates—from diverse medical schools were better equipped to deliver higher patient care. Now, to me, that's an exciting revelation. Nothing we didn't know, but to see actual hard data now confirm what we've always suspected is that we need to not only embrace diversity, it needs to be something we need to incorporate into

everything we do. This study, by the way, I am told was led by one of our own VAMC physicians out in Portland and he was one of the leaders of this study and it showed empirical data that correlated medical school diversity, medical training diversity, with higher patient out care; very compelling for each one of you.

Georgia: If your organizational culture is not equipped with the tools to deal with diversity to be respectful and—more than respectful—to empower differences in the workplace, differences coming from culture, age, gender, generation, work styles...if you don't have that kind of knowledge and competence in the organization, you will not reap the benefits that we're talking about that the research shows. So that's an important link and that's why it's so critical that you folks are here today. You're the leadership of this organization. You will have, by far, the greatest impact on your organizational culture. It just goes with territory of being a leader and a manager and a supervisor in an organization.

Yvonne: Next to speak on the panel was Earl S. Newsome, Deputy Director for VA's Center for Minority Veterans. Mr. Newsome spoke about the duties of his office and some of the challenges that minority veterans face.

Earl: We advise the Secretary on things, on VA policies, and how they affect minority veterans in the United States and—let me back up—and that's the ones, the major groups, we're talking about: African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, which includes American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders. So those are the groups that we focus on. We find that when we make improvements that help give these people more access or help bring their issues to light, it improves the overall system. Some people have said, "Why have an office for Center for Minority Veterans? A vet is a vet is a vet." It ain't exactly so. I give the example of you need to understand that some of the same adversities minorities ran into that caused them to go into the military to better themselves, after they get out and go back home, that same stuff is there.

Earl: So what we look at is the unique needs that these minority veterans have and how that relates to the overall VA mission, stuff that you do day-to-day, boots on the ground. So we do this by first identifying who our target audience is. If you see, basically looking at that chart, minority veterans comprise roughly about 15 percent of the overall VA population. There are some unique needs in certain groups. There are some shared problem areas that they have.

Earl: So you have a part in all this to help that 15 percent. So the aspect I'm looking at for you—the "cultural competencies"—you know, yes, it's race; yes, it's gender; yes, it's sexual orientation, but it's a whole lot of other things. The veterans you work with have lived in other countries, they've lived with other people that don't look like them, they've married other people that don't look like them, their kids grew up maybe sometimes speaking two languages when they were small and overseas. So you're working with a diverse group there, rather than the general population so you need to be aware of that.

Earl: That helps to explain why, if you've got an American Indian veteran and he wants to have a spiritual healer from his tribe to come in, that you understand that the spiritual leader—healer—is not a religion for them, it's part of their culture and that's some of those things, you know, maybe going to the sweat lodge, maybe doing in the talking circle. You know, you talk to guys who are out west where a lot of the big tribes are and they find that with PTSD treatment, sweat lodge, talking circles and all, does a heck of a lot more than what we do with some of the drugs. So, you know, use it as a tool.

Thomas: Fernando O. Rivera, Director of the Washington, DC VA Medical Center, stopped by to talk about the importance and timeliness of this cultural diversity training.

Fernando: We're at a time where our cultural diversities are growing, our understanding of those diversities are growing, and as we start to communicate better with our patients—connect better with our patients—a lot of the information that we're hearing today, our patients have been telling us and continue to tell us. As an organization, we want to prepare ourselves so that we can deliver the highest level of quality, the highest level of patient satisfaction, and it's through these executive training sessions that we're able to do that so.

Yvonne: The final panelist was Carolyn T. Hunt, Associate Dean of the VA Learning University, who spoke about diversity and learning.

Carolyn: My goal this afternoon is to increase your awareness of the importance of diversity on the impact of learning in a healthcare setting. Sometimes I don't know that we realize that people learn in many different ways. People have many different needs for how they learn and what they learn and, in particular, just thinking about some of the statistics that Ms. Coffey presented as our world is changing and as our workplace environment is changing, it's also important that we identify and adopt ways of embracing learning as a key element of practice, of outcomes, and of making our environment more conducive to recruitment, retention, and all of those things that are so key to our survival.

Carolyn: All of us process information differently. You hear a lot about the generational differences that people have and I'm not going to talk about that today, it's an interest of mine and it's really critical and important to learning; however, every generation has its characteristics around such things as information processing, communication styles, and patterns. As I look at many of the workers in today's environment, you know there was a time when we frowned on the headphones, and the earpieces, and the iPod in the one hand, and the computer mouse in the other hand, and listening to the music at the same time, but this is how some of the younger people who are coming into our workforce learn and we have to embrace that and find out how we can maximize that technology to support their learning needs.

Carolyn: What should you do as supervisors and managers? This is not an exhaustive list, by any means, and we can spend any amount—a lot—of time talking about any of

these but, just to highlight a few: number one, be aware of learning styles and cultural differences because people learn in different ways.

Carolyn: There are various ways that people learn and we should always be mindful of how we can maximize those. Encourage and support appropriate professional development experiences, including your own.

Carolyn: Respect for diverse talents and ways of learning. Encourage feedback and self-directed learning and to use the Individual Development Plan. How many people are familiar with IDPs? Very good. I wanted to tie this in to this discussion because as we talk about individualized learning and individualized development, this is one of the most powerful tools that we have.

Thomas: The key speaker for the event was John M. Robinson, Director of the Office of Civil Rights and Chief Diversity Officer at the U.S. Department of State. Addressing the topic of “Speaking in Your Own Voice,” Mr. Robinson talked about an article he is currently working on called “Leadership at the Top” on how important leadership commitment is to diversity and how it should be expressed.

John: This is what we found out. This is what makes the difference in the commitment. You can't just dust off the same speech you gave last year for Martin Luther King Day that worked, you know, and do it again. This is what it has to be: visible, specific, tell a personal story, and it has to be persistent, and intentional. Visible: without the usual suspects. When I'm in the room and my deputy is in the room, everybody knows what we're looking for and what we want to hear and so they say it. It's what do you say as the leaders of the organization when we're not in the room? It has to be specific to your workforce; not vague, we support these principles kind of generally. No, it has to be about your workforce. Personal: tell your own story and the default setting which the article says, your subordinates believe that it is not important unless you do something different. If they're not being held personally responsible, if they haven't done something that's going to end up, end you up on the Washington Post front page, they know that they're off the hook. It needs to be persistent. You don't just do it once a year or once a quarter. You check on it as regularly as you check on the budget, as regularly as you check on business objectives. And it needs to be intentional. This is where I get in trouble with the lawyers because they say, “Well, you can't...” Yes, you can. You need to say, as a leader, “Next time you bring me a cert for some vacancies, I want to see some diversity among the candidates.”

John: Lighthouses do not move. They're fixed points on the landscape and others find their way from the light that they give off. In this business that we all share, the technical parts of it, we're prepared to work on the complaint process and so forth, but those of you in leadership positions have to stand for this, you have to stand for something. You have to be lighthouses for equity, fairness, and inclusion. People in your organization need to see and hear your commitment personally to find their way in the organization.

Yvonne: That's all we have for this edition of Diversity News. We appreciate your watching, and we hope you'll tune in again next month. Until then, for more frequent updates of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink. Just send an e-mail message to our new address shown below, with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line.

Thomas: And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our new Web site or by e-mail from our office. Also, we want to hear from you! If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at our new e-mail address: odi@va.gov with the words DIVERSITY NEWS in the subject line. Until next time...

Both: Have a great month!