

# DIVERSITY— THE ESSENCE OF A HEALTHY BUSINESS ECOSYSTEM

Operators and HR experts weigh in on issues ranging from unconscious bias to ESOL training...and more

By Jack Morgan

In an age of recruitment/retention challenges, laundry operators may be overlooking the advantages that enhancing diversity—particularly in the management ranks—can bring to companies, especially those that rely on immigrant or minority labor to fill hourly jobs. In essence, diversity can enhance competitiveness and staff morale by mining new talent that otherwise might leave you for a job that pays a quarter-an-hour more somewhere else.

That’s the message we obtained through interviews with three operator human resource (HR) specialists and a management consultant on the topic of diversity. Bruce Hodes, a Chicago-based strategic planning specialist, says his clients in

urban areas have figured this out. Others are catching on to the benefits of broadening their management base. Hodes says he tells clients, “If you want them to engage, you better have a diverse leadership and do the same thing with gender.” Promoting diversity is the right thing to do for society, but it’s also a smart way to run your business. “Diversity is good for you,” Hodes says. “You get better opinions. You get better engagement; you’ll get better thinking. The urban companies, they get it. They got it five years ago.”

## UNCONSCIOUS BIAS: GAUGING THE IMPACT

After last year’s civil unrest following police involvement in the death and serious wounding of African American men in Minneapolis and Kenosha, WI, the national focus on race relations took center stage. Similarly, interest centered on the need to address diversity, equity and inclusion issues in the broader society, as well as in business. One concern

frequently voiced in business circles is that minority employees, including prospects for management jobs, face disadvantages—not necessarily from overt racism or xenophobia—but rather a subtle attitude of unwitting bias that holds them back. In effect, if a company has always advanced white-male candidates into the management jobs, in some cases that’s the standard practice. Often, change comes slowly, regardless of demographic shifts.

The theory of unconscious bias is hard to pin down. How do you measure attitudes that employees aren’t even aware of? Nonetheless, Angela Howard, vice president, people development & human experience for Spindle, Woodridge, IL, says training can make a difference by enhancing understanding among employees of differing backgrounds. Specifically, Howard recommends having employees engage in open discussions about various biases, coupled with relevant benchmarking that can reduce prejudices based on race, nationality, gender and other factors. Similarly, discussions may

focus on the damage done by “microaggressions.” These are the routine verbal, nonverbal and environmental slights or insults that communicate hostile or negative messages to targeted people, based solely on their membership in marginalized groups, according to Derald Wing Sue, a professor of psychology and education at Columbia University.

“There is an additional step needed to truly change unconscious behaviors and decision making by translating the training into leadership commitment and an ongoing understanding of how unconscious bias shows up in our behaviors and decision making,” says Howard, who chairs TRSA’s Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee, which was formed last summer. Like other strategic goals, she says companies can track progress in addressing unconscious bias. “The best way to measure the impact is to build in inclusive behaviors into leadership and performance expectations,” Howard says. “True Accountability (are tough conversations being had and decisions made?) around exclusive behaviors is also an important way to measure, (unconscious bias).”

Hodes says biases are a human trait fueled by assumptions, rather than facts. Training to address unconscious bias can help companies by initiating a dialogue among employees to discuss issues related to diversity. “I think the first thing—yes—you engage people in what they see,” Hodes says. “If somebody says they’re not a racist or ‘I do not have a bias,’ for me that’s an opportunity to engage with them in a conversation. I get curious about that because certainly I’m not that way as a human being. I haven’t met any human beings that are that way. So then you say that you’re not that way, let’s talk about that. And I would encourage them to do an inquiry.”

Any effective training on unconscious bias needs to happen in a neutral environment where staff feel free speak their minds. “You’ve got to make it safe for people,” he adds. “They think they’re going to be judged, you’ve got to have it

## Affinity Groups: Another Idea for Advancing Diversity

Affinity or Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) comprised of minority, immigrant or other groups of employees can promote a company’s diversity and inclusion and conclusion efforts. They also can facilitate networking, mentoring and other opportunities for professional and personal development, according to Mishell Parreno Taylor in an online article available on the Society for Human Resources website (see [bit.ly/ERGbackground](https://bit.ly/ERGbackground)).

However, Taylor cites two risks facing companies that sponsor such organizations: 1) if the ERG discussions lead to social media posts that are critical of the company or individuals, that can spur controversies that undermine the value of the group in terms promoting the benefits of diversity. 2) If employees who aren’t part of the ethnic, racial or other group that’s the focus are of the ERG feel excluded or “threatened” by its actions, this too can undermine staff unity and morale. Employers should carefully monitor these concerns and ensure ongoing compliance with civil rights laws banning workplace discrimination.

While ERG’s are more common in large corporations, independent laundry operators may also sponsor such groups that can provide an important communications channel to management. Angela Howard, vice president, people development & human experience for Spindle, Woodridge, IL, says she prefers similar groups that focus on contributing to the culture of the organization. “I believe that business resource groups or culture committees are more effective. It’s important to create a structure that unifies, creates belonging and community and allows team members at all levels to shape the culture of the organization. Affinity groups don’t always accomplish that, but they sometimes do.”

JonPaul McFarland, human resources director for AlSCO Uniforms, Salt Lake City, says he’s had positive experience with another variation on the ERG concept. “I’ve been involved in employee focus groups, but not with Affinity Groups. I like the idea a lot. Management could gain some important insights by having such groups.” Russell Holt, chief compliance officer for Superior Linen Service, Tulsa, OK, says he favors the idea, so long as it’s managed in ways that don’t alienate employees who aren’t part of the group that comprises the ERG. “Affinity groups have the potential to offer beneficial information for organizations as they strive to cultivate more inclusive workplaces,” he says. “They also have the potential to generate class-action lawsuits if mishandled. Before starting a group, I would recommend that the group’s purpose and goals be mapped out and clearly defined. And I would suggest that any restrictions be applied equally and uniformly to all groups.”

Bruce Hodes, a Chicago-based management consultant, says he likes the ERG concept because it can help managers, especially white males, enhance their perspective of employees who have different personal characteristics, such as race and gender. This, in turn, can improve employee relations. “We have to consider ourselves that we, white people, experience the world differently than they do and really listen to what it’s like to be different.”

be safe for people to explore their biases and how they see it.”

Russell Holt, chief compliance officer for Superior Linen Service, Tulsa, OK, cautions that if unconscious bias training is mishandled, it can have a counterproductive impact by alienating various staff members. “I think it is important to train the management team on the term unconscious bias/implicit bias by explaining what the term means and how it is being used in today’s communications

related to diversity and inclusion,” says Holt, who’s also vice chair of TRSA’s Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee. “But I do recommend carefully vetting all training before rolling it out. Employers should make sure the training is informative and unifying. The last thing any of us want to do is create a divisive and exclusive work environment while attempting to do just the opposite.”

JonPaul McFarland, human resources director for AlSCO Uniforms, Salt Lake

City, emphasized the value of training staff on diversity-related issues, as well as tracking related progress. “Awareness begins with education,” he says. “So it’s vital. Compared to measuring the effectiveness of technical training, which is relatively easy, measuring the impact of UB (unconscious bias) training is more difficult.” McFarland added that measurable results should include tracking progress in terms of:

- Larger pools of diverse qualified candidates
- Larger number of diverse employees retained
- Larger number of diverse employees promoted into positions of authority and responsibility, most importantly into senior management jobs
- Greater equity in salaries for women and other underrepresented groups
- Fewer lawsuits and EEOC charges

Hodes says the key to a successful program to examine unconscious bias is to get staff to accept that biases are a common trait that we all share and that bringing them to light can enhance employee morale and clear the way for improved business performance. “It’s a human phenomenon, not *their* phenomenon,” he says. “I think there are ways for people to start to explore their biases, their automatic biases. I mean, even from, say I’m walking down the street, I’ve got a woman following me ... I’m walking down the street; I’ve got a man following me.” The goal is for employees to see their biases for what they are ... opinions, rather than facts. Training can help bridge differences among staff, he says.

## ENSURING A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Besides combatting prejudices—conscious or unconscious—another challenge facing companies seeking to make the most of their staff resources is to find

## Supply Chain Diversification: Think Outside Your Four Walls

The idea of diversifying supply chains to include small or minority-owned companies is often embraced by large companies—either out of a genuine desire to get new ideas and help small businesses, or to comply with rules mandated in government-contracting requirements. Smaller or independent companies tend to focus less on this issue, but that doesn’t mean they can’t benefit from seeking alternative suppliers, including minority-owned firms.

Russell Holt, chief compliance officer for Superior Linen Service, Tulsa, OK, says diversifying one’s supplier base takes extra work for smaller businesses, but it’s worth the effort. “As an independently owned and operated company and understanding how important it was to be considered to service customers early on, while competing against much larger companies, and how that factored into our growth, I believe it is important to work with companies owned and operated by underrepresented groups, which will not only help expand our vendor selection, but will also help our overall economy grow more robust. It’s a win-win.”

JonPaul McFarland, human resources director for AlSCO Uniforms, Salt Lake City, says he favors the concept as well, but he opposes government mandates for a set number of minority-owned suppliers. “Businesses have a fundamental right to choose the best supplier to suit their needs,” he says. “Usually it comes down to quality, price, innovative products and first to market. Businesses can choose to include companies led by underrepresented minorities if they wish, but they should not be coerced into doing so by legislation or other pressures.

Angela Howard, vice president, people development & human experience for Spindle, Woodridge, IL, says she feels diversifying supplier networks is an “extremely important” way for a company to access new ideas. “This work is outside of our four walls,” she says. “Evaluating our partnerships, thinking critically about the suppliers and ensuring we are considering diverse suppliers is an important lever to this work. It’s also important that we seek partners outside of our own networks. We naturally want to partner and do business with like-minded partners that are just like us.”

ways to bridge the skills gap among various groups, such as nonnative speakers of English. Employees with limited English skills can get by in entry-level jobs like feeding towels or soil sorting. But if you want to move them to harder-to-fill route service or maintenance jobs, technical training and/or English as a second language (ESOL) education is a worthy investment. Howard describes ESOL training as a common-sense move. “Given that we live in a country where English is the most commonly spoken language, yes, I think offering opportunities to strengthen that skill set is certainly an opportunity to give team members the tools to communicate and perform their jobs more effectively,” she says, adding that to ensure compliance and create an inclusive work environment, operators in workplaces where multiple languages are spoken need to provide translations of key documents such as safety and training manuals.

Hodes says that while ESOL classes are generally popular, communications in a diverse workforce is a two-way street. In other words, native English speakers need a rudimentary understanding of the employees’ native tongue as well. He adds, speaking in reference to two industrial launderers that, “The other thing that I do, is say: ‘Supervisor, you need to learn ‘Roscoe Spanish’; you need to learn ‘Plymate Spanish’ because we need to communicate.’”

Holt notes that educating employees in English language and other skills is a win-win for employees as well as the company. “I think it makes sense as an employer to help employees who want to better themselves,” Holt says. “There may be other underrepresented groups that could use a hand up to help level the playing field with other groups, and HR and the management team should try to be aware of those opportunities and offer resources to those individuals.” This training can pay dividends by preparing more staff for higher-skill jobs—a benefit to both the employee and the company. “I believe training is the key to leveling the field for underrepresented groups,” Holt says. “Companies could

put together training programs related to the business that would help round out individuals’ skills, which would help create more job opportunities for individuals interested in growing with the company and expand the pool of qualified internal applicants.”

### GROWTH OPPORTUNITY

Between COVID-19-related illnesses and the recession that began in March 2020, many companies are seeking renewed growth. At the same time, fear of the virus, plus government-aid programs and intense competition for employees, have posed challenges to hiring. This extends not only to completing daily throughput requirements but replacing aging managers who are retiring. While there’s no silver-bullet solution to these issues, doing more to promote staff from within is a natural step. If a large number of your staff are not native English speakers or have different racial or ethnic backgrounds than the management team, executives need to ask themselves how well they’re preparing these people to advance. “It starts with education,” McFarland says. “Managers

who include a wider population of qualified diverse employees in their succession planning increase the number of potential successors.”

Hodes says he often hears operator clients say they’re open to promoting or hiring minority candidates, but that they can’t find them. He suspects some aren’t focusing enough attention on diversifying their leadership teams. To put it another way, if there isn’t some parity in the racial/ethnic makeup between your hourly staff and the management team, operators need to ask themselves why. For example, if a fifth of your staff are Hispanic, but few if any members of the leadership team are from that group, you’re missing an opportunity. Likewise with gender. “If 20% of my employees are women, and I have nobody (female) in my leadership team, something’s off.” As in a forest, Hodes adds, diversity can and should be source of strength. “The more diverse an ecosystem is, the healthier it is. The more diverse and different views the company has, the healthier it will be.” **TS**

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### Cultivating In-House Talent—A Win-Win for Roscoe

Miriam Avila started out in 1994 as an entry-level production employee at the Roscoe Co., Chicago, but Operations Team Leader Mike Alesia realized early on that she could do more, and he acted accordingly. With extensive training and support, Avila became the company’s first Certified Production Team member. Ultimately, she took charge of the entire department. President James Buik says her experience affirms the Roscoe Co.’s commitment to developing leaders internally. “It ties in with our policy of promoting from within and promoting individuals from diverse backgrounds,” he says. Avila says she’s grateful for the opportunity to advance, while expanding her skills. “I’m very lucky to have found a family-owned company like Roscoe that values and respects all cultures and diverse backgrounds,” she says, adding that, “To me, that is what makes us a strong company and a strong industry. Here at Roscoe we are a diverse company; always committed to investing in the professional and personal growth of our team members.”