

If You Know Better... You Do Better
MassHousing's New Approach to Diversity
Training
MassHousing
Management Innovation: Human Resources

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The face of the workforce in the United States is changing – driven in large part by the new demographic that defines the millennial generation. With over 75 million people falling into this generation – millennials are eclipsing the current size of the postwar baby boom generation. The Brookings Institute recently reported that millennials make up nearly a quarter of the total population and beyond that – 38% of the working age population. Most significant is the fact that this generation is 44% minority. This fact demands a re-orientation of traditional thinking about how the workplace is defined and how best to help ensure that everyone feels both valued and respected.

Another recent study by the University of Illinois notes that as the workplace becomes more diverse, managers and staff must learn to deal with a diverse group of employees. Those who do not learn to interact with a diverse group will risk falling behind in their jobs as more conflict arises because of a lack of understanding. Diversity training is a proven strategy to help maintain and raise competencies in the workplace, reducing the potential for conflict and increasing the effectiveness of a team overall.

MassHousing believes strongly in the importance of diversity training in the workplace. But as the make-up of the workforce is changing – so too must our workforce training change. The way that we approach diversity training cannot be the way that we approached it ten years ago – or even five years ago. A fresh approach is critical to staff buy-in and acceptance of this effort. Moreover, research in this field shows that three to five years is needed to begin to achieve real results in changing attitudes and mindsets.

As such, MassHousing has developed a five-year plan for its re-vamped diversity training efforts for Agency staff. To develop this plan, we took a critical look at where our Agency's "blind spots" were – and we realized there were many. We had blind spots about how we talked with staff and also about how managers managed. It was clear the Agency needed to carve out time for training – and to ensure that the topics that were covered considered diversity in many forms. This includes racial diversity, generational diversity, gender diversity and diversity with regard to sexual orientation.

In order to pursue a five-year strategy to improve MassHousing's diversity and inclusion efforts, it was also important for us to lay the foundation for what diversity and inclusion actually means. To do this – MassHousing took a big picture approach to reviewing the culture. Fortuitously, MassHousing hired a new Director of Human Capital and Organizational Management in December of 2016.

This Director was new to MassHousing and as such was well positioned to undertake a large-scale effort to meet with every director, manager and supervisor in the Agency. In an Agency the size of MassHousing (350 employees), this was no small feat. These meetings with the 75 employees in supervisory positions were centered around gaining a better understanding of each person's experience within the organization. This helped the Director to assess the culture at MassHousing and the subtle points that emerged around diversity. Because MassHousing has a largely tenured workforce – this kind of one-on-one conversation was very important – and instructive. Simply trying to utilize a "survey" to try to uncover where people were in their understanding wouldn't be sufficient. Instead, this effort demanded one-on-one conversations and an honest dialogue. This also fit into our stated vision for the Agency's values – defined in the broad categories of: Integrity, Excellence, Collaboration, Respect, Accountability and

Service. In particular, within the "Respect" category – there is a goal that states that each employee shall endeavor to, "Be an active listener, focused on hearing the intended message." With the sensitivity that surrounds issues of diversity and inclusion this kind of focus was particularly important.

MassHousing employees have an average of 15 years with the Agency. This means that there can sometimes be a bias towards, "the way we have always done things." But because this is a common bias ... that didn't mean that it had to stay that way. In fact – one of the main principals of the Agency's new focus on Human Resources is that, "If you **know** better ... you **do** better."

The next step in the process was to put together focus groups of Agency employees who would consider broadly some of the issues around diversity and inclusion and how they felt these topics related to their work. The goal here was to help build content for future trainings by hearing first-hand what employees considered to be areas of sensitivity. These focus groups were chosen "randomly" but at the same time "deliberatively." This means that managers were asked to volunteer the names of staff members whom they thought would be able to be honest and who might feel comfortable sharing in a larger group. But at the same time, Human Resources staff reviewed the names that managers submitted, to ensure that these groups offered a good mix in terms of being representative of a cross-section of employees with regard to gender, age and race – as well as tenured versus newer employees.

The reaction by employees to being selected for this first focus group was, candidly, mixed. We noted that employees seemed somewhat guarded and reserved. This was new to them – and so this was to be expected. However, what they may not have expected was a facilitator that the Agency had selected carefully to offer a different kind of diversity training. The training was interactive ... rather than staid. The participants didn't simply sit as someone presented a series of PowerPoint slides and lectured on the topic of diversity. Rather, employees were asked to come into the conference room where the training was held – and sit at small tables of four. In particular, employees were asked **not** to sit with colleagues whom they knew well. Rather, they were encouraged to sit with other staff from another Division or Department whom they might not know at all or at least might not know well. The goal here was to create an environment where employees felt a little more comfortable speaking freely and openly about their perceptions about diversity at the Agency. By working in small groups with other employees whom they didn't know as well – it allowed the participants to engage without a colleague's pre-conceptions interfering with an open dialogue. Importantly, supervisors and their employees had separate trainings to continue to foster an environment where everyone felt they could speak freely.

MassHousing also benefited from choosing a dynamic facilitator who came with strong references from her other clients. This young woman of color was an experienced trainer – but her manner was generous, open and honest. When our HR staff interviewed her prior to her selection – it was clear that she would be a good fit for the Agency. It was important to engage in trainings that opened lines of communication – by asking questions that were difficult and thought-provoking but not accusatory or leading. By creating opportunities for small group discussion and larger group discussion – a great deal of learning occurred about the issues of diversity and inclusion broadly and started a conversation about how that diversity related to the workforce at MassHousing. Over the next few weeks after this first focus group – word began to trickle back to the HR staff that employees had found the focus sessions engaging and welcoming

– and most importantly **different** from what they expected. They were telling their co-workers who hadn't participated – what a good experience it was – and how positive it felt. Again, the strategic way in which this group of employees was chosen was paying dividends as their experience – and follow-up with their co-workers – lent validity to the training process.

The focus group was then followed by a pilot training session which involved 20 employees. This then culminated in an Agency-wide training on the topic. This same pattern of focus group, pilot training and Agency-wide training has now been employed for a total of three cycles and the feedback from employees has been excellent.

At each successive step, it became clear that participation was generally easier and more relaxed. The facilitator noted that she sensed a difference in people's willingness to discuss some of the difficult topics – because they believed that they would be **heard**. Equally important was the fact that after the initial training which provided a foundational introduction to the topic of Diversity and Inclusion, the next two topics were driven directly by what the focus group participants (who again, represented a good cross-section of the Agency) decided that they wanted to learn more about. As such, the next two topics for trainings were centered around unconscious bias and generational bias.

To determine whether employees really believed that these trainings were helpful – MassHousing developed anonymous surveys for each employee to complete that were collected at the close of each session and were submitted to maintain anonymity. A stunning 98% of the feedback was positive and noted that the employee felt that the training was productive – in particular in the areas of “content learning,” and “trust of presenter.” Many surveys also noted that the participants were “comfortable” and “excited about future topics.” We were also pleased by additional comments such as, “this was the best training I have ever received” and “that was the fastest three-hour training ever!” Another marker of success was the fact that by the time the third focus group came around there were so many employees who **voluntarily** signed up – instead of being recommended by their supervisors that we actually had more willing participants than we could accommodate in that session. This is progress.

The scope of what a diverse workforce means is changing – and it follows that the training for that diverse workforce must change as well. MassHousing has found a formula that works by engaging employees and making them part of the process. It is something in which they participate actively – not something that is simply required of them. We believe that this has been a key difference in the program's success and will contribute to the growth and development of these diversity trainings over time. The goal is that in this ongoing effort these trainings become part of who we are as an Agency and keep us focused on where we are going and who we want to become. And this – this is culture change.