

Initiating Women's Initiatives

By Nicole Nehama Auerbach

For reasons that are becoming more self-evident on a daily basis, "diversity" has secured a position at the top of the list of issues that corporate America has been grappling with for the past few years. Still, the exact formula to both achieve and sustain a diverse workplace for women and minorities has proven somewhat elusive.

As a result, while many corporations and service businesses have declared a commitment to changing the historical landscape, few know exactly where to begin. Creating a successful diversity initiative is often the cornerstone to making true strides towards corporate diversity.

Despite the obvious overlap, there are significant differences between the issues facing women and those facing racial/ethnic minorities. While creating separate initiatives is both warranted and recommended, they should be integrated to ensure consistency of message.

Developing a women's initiative is a good start for a company and will provide lessons that are applicable to a minority initiative as well.

The purpose of a women's initiative is to provide a forum to voice concerns to management and devise solutions to issues that have an impact on the retention, development and advancement of women in the company. Some steps to creating a successful initiative are:

1. Get "Buy In" From Management.

Before embarking on a women's initiative, obtain the appropriate endorsement from management. Failure to get this support will likely doom the initiative, as it will be apparent very quickly that the ability to effectuate change is limited, and this will have a commensurate effect on the willingness to participate.

The "buy in" from management should not simply be financial. Ideally, it should include regular communication of the initiative's message from the top down.

2. Get Feedback.

Before designing a women's initiative that is set in stone, find out from the women in the company what issues they are facing and what they would like the initiative to accomplish.

For example, when our law firm started an initiative in 2004, we held a kick-off event and distributed a survey so that the women could have input into the initiative. From that, we learned that there was an overwhelming desire

for business development training for women, so we focused on that as part of our first efforts.

3. Structuring the Initiative. Do not be fooled – running a successful initiative takes a great deal of time and effort. It helps to create a main committee comprised of committed women from various parts of the company. In our firm, because we have several geographic locations, our "National Committee" is comprised of 2-3 representatives from each office. This Committee convenes via conference call each month and gets together annually for a face-to-face retreat. It is the body that creates the overall policy for the initiative. In addition, each office has local internal and external event committees to help implement the specific goals of the local office.

4. Ensure Appropriate Administrative Support. Depending on the size of your organization, handling the administrative tasks involved in running an initiative will likely be too time-consuming for a small group of people who are also trying to handle their professional responsibilities.

Appropriate administrative support is key to giving those professionals the ability to delegate the numerous tasks involved in planning events, maintaining up-to-date marketing pieces and mailing lists, and communicating internally among the women of the company.

Having designated marketing or administrative staff devoted to the initiative helps eliminate the learning curve each time a new event or program is planned.

5. Identify Goals. While providing internal programming or holding client events may be a significant part of your initiative, chances are that simply providing these programs will not effectuate the type of institutional change that most companies envision. From the women's initiative perspective, fostering an environment where a larger number of women are found in leadership roles or among the ranks of upper management is a typical goal among companies today.

Achieving this goal is not going to happen overnight. Rather, it will be the product of specifically designed efforts that are identified and carefully implemented. Identifying the goals and ways to achieve those goals in your organization is imperative to long-lasting success.

Measuring progress and communicating that progress to management on a regular basis



will also ensure that the initiative remains on track.

6. Share. While each organization is unique, the issues facing women in corporate America today are largely the same. Don't keep your efforts to yourself, and similarly, if you need new ideas, don't hesitate to go to clients, vendors or other resources for assistance. Better yet, sponsor a joint event with a women's initiative of one of your best customers. This breeds goodwill and stronger relationships for both companies.

Also, remember that the efforts you make can benefit men as well as women. Our women's initiative routinely "sponsors" programs for all attorneys, and in doing so, further establishes the legitimacy of the initiative and the firm's commitment to our diversity.

Creating greater diversity with respect to minorities and women takes time. In both cases, however, it is important to remember to communicate their activities and goals to the rest of the company. It is through both education and action that diversity will eventually be achieved.

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