Diversity by design

By Lisa Lopez Snyder, Contributing Writer

From the water cooler to the boardroom, from the call center to the market, is diversity a part of your workplace?

For employers, this can be an immeasurable question, as diversity takes on a myriad of forms. A company might carry out recruitment, retention and advancement initiatives that attract and support people who differ in terms of their racial, ethnic, gender, physical ability and generational backgrounds. Another organization may communicate with individuals across all these aspects through mentoring programs and by supporting new leaders making their way up the organizational ladder.

A company may also carry out strategies that help resolve conflicts among staff members who struggle with a project because of differing cultural or generational perspectives.

So what does an employer need to do to take the first step?

Where to start?

Knowing where your organization should start means determining where you stand, says Susan Lill, founder of and certified diversity trainer with Align HR Services.

The first step for a company is to conduct an assessment, which may include employee surveys or hiring a consultant to walk through the company's practices and policies.

An assessment will show that companies generally fall into one of four types in terms of their level of diversity readiness, Lill says:
- We-don't-know-what-we-don't-know
- Compliant-plus
- Committed
- All the above, plus community outreach.

The We-don't-know-what-we-don't-know company may be new to diversity. Managers may have decided to have a diversity initiative, but may not have written affirmative action plans or trained staff on diversity.

The Compliant-plus company meets all its Equal Employment Opportunity requirements, says Lill, and may or may not have a written affirmative action plan. "The company may have had some diversity training, or some internal activities around diversity such as cultural events."

The Committed company generally has top leadership saying it's important for people to articulate the case for diversity, Lill adds, and with an approach that goes beyond just recruitment in terms of age, gender, race and ethnicity. This company values diversity in terms of how it can create success for the work force, she said. Managers have been trained and leaders have likely incorporated diversity into their core values and practices.

The All the above, plus community outreach company has incorporated diversity as part of its business operations. This may include purchasing goods and services from minority- and women-owned vendors and setting up internships with underrepresented students from high schools and historically black colleges. "They might even track those efforts," Lill says.

Creating a supportive environment

Knowing which category your company fits into will help determine the next steps, Lill says. The process is one that requires an organization to look inward as well as outward and recognize diversity as a corporate asset. That means developing an environment that supports employees and recognizes and respects their differences.

For companies like BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina, which has built a diverse work force over the last eight years, it was a matter of institutionalizing diversity as part of its corporate objectives.

For example, when the company was recruiting bilingual staff who spoke English and Spanish for their call centers, it found that building a relationship with the local Latino community was important in order to hire and market to the Latino community.

"We were approaching our recruiting efforts the way we had done traditionally," says Gayel Wigfall, diversity consultant with BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina. "And because there wasn't that personal connection within the Spanish-speaking community, we weren't getting the responses that we anticipated. We had become accustomed to our brand being very recognizable to the population."

The company then reached out to local Hispanic groups, such as the S.C. Hispanic Leadership Council and the S.C. Hispanic/ Latino Health Coalition. It also held focus group sessions with existing bilingual staff to learn what they enjoyed about working at BlueCross BlueShield for both a marketing and recruitment perspective.

"That was our first foray into affinity groups," Wigfall says, "and it helped us understand that there is a difference between being bilingual and bicultural."

Understanding diversity's dimensions

Employers can also carry out initiatives that focus on the dimensions of diversity, says Lill.

"Diversity is not just getting the right people in the right seats assuming that diversity will happen. It really should be on purpose," she says, "by design, not by default."

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For example, creating multiple modes of communication for employees may help individuals from different cultures, gender and generations feel included in a project or a meeting.

Take a general staff meeting. Often, more quiet employees will let the more "type A" colleague dominate a meeting. In this case, Lill says, find ways to encourage the quiet ones. One way to do that might mean creating a roundtable discussion or small group gatherings rather than meeting in a traditional conference room style. "It's critical to give everyone a chance to be heard rather than assuming that silence means compliance or agreement," Lill says.

At BlueCross BlueShield, managers e-mail a staff meeting agenda in advance of the meeting and ask employees in that e-mail for suggestions to present at the meeting or to send to managers via an e-mail response. That simple method can be powerful, says Wigfall.

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In terms of generational differences, employers may that find "Generation Y" employees (individuals born, roughly, between 1980 and 1983) want performance feedback frequently and informally.

For companies with global business, acculturation training may be a more appropriate approach, Lill says. A company will want to ask itself, "How do we greet people in Vietnam? How do we interact with individuals from other countries?

"It's a matter of expanding their horizons from a global mindset," Lill notes.

In some cases, businesses may want to have their materials translated. The important point there is to retain a certified translator who is familiar with the particular culture of the market the employer is trying to reach.

Who to train, how to measure?

The ideal model for integrating diversity into the workplace is to ensure that the CEO understands and supports implementing a diversity program. Consulting firms offer a range of training programs tailored to each organization.

In the case of a company with CEO and top executive support, training for managers is the key. BlueCross BlueShield, for instance, recently launched a "first-level" diversity training for its managers. These are half-day sessions focused on a wide range of topics.

A company might create incentives around measurable diversity objectives. As an example, Lill says employers may consider tying bonuses to the achievement of objectives, whether it is with hiring, retaining or moving qualified diverse individuals up the organizational ladder, or setting goals with the percentage of dollars that are spent with minority- or women-owned suppliers.

South Carolina employers need to be aware of need to be aware of the pending labor shortage and the mass immigration of new residents to the state. "If they don't embrace these individuals and capitalize on their skills, they may find themselves in a difficult [market] situation," says Lill.

Calder Ehrmann, a diversity champion and former executive at Michelin North America, agrees. He also reminds employers that as they and state and local government work to bring high-tech firms to South Carolina, there is a need to work on "raising the bottom third of the income scale," Ehrmann says, through investment in education. "We need to invest in training (people0 to compete on a global basis, he says.

"The challenge for organizations is to

recognize diversity as a corporate asset," adds Wigfall. "You want to be able to capitalize on the opportunities that the market provides. Otherwise, if you (continue to) market in the same way, then you may miss out on (individuals) that someone else is going to capture." ■