



*Kinneil Coltman, director of diversity for the Greenville Hospital System, is among a growing number of professionals hired to help companies address diversity issues in the workplace. (photo/Nill Silver)*

## Wanted: Diversity manager

*By Lydia Dishman, Contributing Writer*

On one hand you have Jerry Knighton, assistant director to the Office of Access and Equity at Clemson University, a black man. On the other, you have Kinneil Coltman, director of diversity for the Greenville Hospital System, a blonde white woman. The two are, for all outward appearances, quite different.

But they actually have plenty in common. In addition to both being young, attractive and articulate professionals, they are each pursuing career paths devoted to promoting diversity in their respective workplaces and the wider community.

Coltman finds herself dealing with people's assumptions and misconceptions on an almost daily basis, and not just from the hospital's health care providers treating a diverse pool of patients. "There is a bit of a stereotype that people that (work in diversity) are people of color," she notes and admits that she has to work *not* to get defensive when those people

assume that she "doesn't get it," because she is white and can't understand what it is like to be a minority.

"When I see their reaction, it is a great entrée into a conversation about everyone's shock at what race still means," she explains.

Knighton and Coltman are part of a growing number of executives hired to handle what is still, for many, a sticky issue. Knighton says the effort reaches back to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on affirmative action, which made diversity a compelling interest for corporate America.

Major settlements in race discrimination lawsuits against companies such as Coca-Cola pushed the diversity meter's needle even further toward necessitating change. For businesses, double-digit employee diversity and minority participation has been touted as something to strive for, much like double-digit profit margins. And it can be just as difficult to achieve without professional help.

A popular, albeit expensive approach, is to enroll managers and employees in a series of diversity workshops and presentations designed to teach them the best ways to work together.

Consultants such as Susan Lill of Align HR, a division of Find Great People, and Ava Smith, owner of HR Specialties, insist that they have seen the training sessions they provide offer immediate and long lasting results. Lill says the "Similarities and Differences" part of training is a fun and easy exercise. At the end, people discover that their assumptions are very in tune with various dimensions of diversity," which she believes is a very valuable lesson.

Especially with generational differences, Lill says these exercises help every participant learn where others are coming from and to communicate more effectively with each other. "For example, while the baby boomer wants to give an annual review, the Gen Xer

says they want feedback now," she says. Once that conversation takes place, it becomes possible to work more efficiently as a team.

Noting that there are plenty of generational biases, an important goal for Coltman at Greenville Hospital is that employees broaden their definition of diversity to include more than just race and gender. "They need to see socio-economic differences, family status, military background, learning styles, the whole scope, before they can get to a place where they can make change," she says.

It is also critical to have someone who is accountable for reinforcing the results of the training.

Knighton says that in addition to his position, Clemson will hire a chief diversity officer to do just that. "That person will have responsibility for all initiatives, to ensure the university is inclusive in all aspects," Knighton says, adding that he hopes this will produce an environment where "students graduate knowing how to compete in global marketplace and to focus on how to work with people not like them."

Coltman believes that academia is behind the eight ball in this particular niche. While she was able to create her own course of study at the University of Houston at Clear Lake, she says diversity is often relegated to "just one course in the masters program in public health."

So where can your company find a diversity professional?

Though Lill says there is no national organization, there are consultant registries of diversity specialists. Lill herself went through the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM.org) Train the Trainer certification program, and also cites the American Institute for Managing Diversity, the South Carolina Diversity Council, local chambers of commerce and The Riley Institute as good sources for

finding qualified candidates to consult or hire.

Smith believes the best way to determine if a potential diversity manager or trainer is



Coltman conducts a New Employee Orientation program at the Greenville Hospital System each Monday, designed to offer employees insight into how diversity impacts their interactions with co-workers as well as patients. (photo/Nill Silver)

right for your company is to first ask about their approach and follow up styles to determine if they match your company's culture, as well as the attitude and personality of your staff.

"They certainly need to be seasoned," Lill points out, as it is a complex business reading around people's biases. She cautions against using an inexperienced trainer who may not be adept at handling employees who might have a reaction or outburst. "Probe training and experience, get testimonials and references from multiple clients," advises Lill.

Coltman is hopeful that more people in diversity management positions, whether they are independent contractors or full-time employees will help change the

face of the workplace for the better. "This part of the country has had some very public struggles with diversity, but there are some very progressive things going on." ■

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### Diversity training initiatives have positive effects when:

- Training is voluntary.
- The focus is on structural change, such as increased mentoring and rotations that give people a shot at high-profile assignments.
- The motivation is to advance business goals and to open up new markets.
- Companies set targets and hold executives responsible for meeting those targets.

### Diversity training initiatives have negative effects when:

- Training is mandatory and emphasizes the risk of discrimination lawsuits and threats; for example, downloading government regulations to educate managers on how not to discriminate.
- Programs involve a few brief training workshops or online sessions that often focus on "sensitivity training" and interpersonal attitude change.
- The training emphasizes social justice goals and the need to redress historical wrongs.

Source: "Best Practices or Best Guesses? Assessing the Efficacy of Corporate Affirmative Action and Diversity Policies" by Alexandra Kalev, the University of California at Berkeley; Frank Dobbin, Harvard University; and Erin Kelly, the University of Minnesota.