

**2005 Diversity Conference**  
**“Tools for Success; Building with Diversity”**  
**Workshop: Creating and Sustaining Welcoming Environments**  
*Fariborz Pakseresht*

**Best practice ideas and thinking from employees in the Department of Human Services.**

**1. What do you see as basic elements of creating and sustaining a welcoming environment for a diverse workforce?**

- **Knowledgeable/Proactive Leadership:** Top-level to Operational management, in general, actively support diversity efforts, and take the lead on influencing a welcoming environment and culture. Managers recognize and/or are willing to receive feedback regarding their need or the need for their employees to improve their skills as it relates to diversify. All managers have skills to respond effectively to staff regarding diverse issues minimizing the impact on diverse managers. The weight of diversity implementation rests with management.
- **Institutionalizing into practice/policy:** Diversity is consistently an influencing factor in our planning, discussions, and decision. Our human resource and client service policies and regulations include clear diversity related components. We hold our vendors and providers to high diversity standards in their service delivery. We are quick to identify and change practice/policy to ensure inclusiveness, cultural sensitivity, and access. Agency supports and participates in employee networks.
- **Diverse workforce at all levels:** nationwide and targeted recruitments.
  - Within professional bounds, you create the kind of space you do at home to welcome people. Little things like making sure the person's work space had been cleaned up, and furniture has been returned....or that it's not furnished with the office dregs.
  - Thinking about your first day on the job and putting in place things that would have made you feel welcome.
  - Being thoughtful about orientating the new person.....introductions, showing them around the office, scheduling time with other staff, a strategy to get them going in their new job.

- It is really hard....and isolating...if you are the first and only.
  - Having a work environment where people feel safe and free to be themselves and to ask how things work.
  - I think having transparency in how things get done.
  - Being mindful that there's a new person. People develop their habits and routines and forget to include the new person, so the burden to "integrating" falls to the new person.
  - Consistent hiring practice that minimize the opportunity of inequity. All recruitment and selections and human resource staff have the skills to market DHS to diverse populations to read PD100s with a diverse perspective. There are opportunities to develop. Managers are trained on interviewing diverse populations.
- **Authentic Conversations/Vulnerability:** Top-level to operational managers not only hire but build relationships with their staff (diverse or not). They are authentic in their conversations and feedback. They are willing to receive feedback and say, "I don't know".
    - Consciously dismantling harmful stereotypes – people, though similar, are individuals
    - Communicating honestly with others – especially if you're unfamiliar with people with ethnic makeup outside your own, or people with disabilities ... this could include saying to others differing from yourself "I need help to know if something I do or say is offensive or not appropriate – how should we handle such situations? Should we communicate in person, via email, or is there a better means to do so?"
    - Having a colorful and gender-balanced workforce top-to-bottom – testifies recruiters are walking the diversity talk
    - Dignifying all persons with R-E-S-P-E-C-T
    - Showing interest in other's value systems and beliefs
    - Be open to hearing/learning about individuals'/groups' perception on non-welcome environments and then acting on beneficial suggestions that will further diversity goals
    - Means for receiving criticism about departmental faux pas that contradict diversity mission/vision/objectives and responding appropriately

- Department that takes a proactive approach to shape a desirable workplace accepting of a global society through continuous learning since ALL could grow in this area
- Rewards/motivational tools to positively reward staff for submitting beneficial suggestions that will help move the department closer to higher-level cultural competency – i.e., allowing managers with excessive leave time on the books to donate leave time into the “Leave-Time Reward Bank” and then using it to reward staff with leave time for work done **exceptionally well** in this area and other areas beneficial to the department (promote donating leave time for wellness as well as sickness)
- Diversity/Cultural Audits to assess cultural competencies across the department (not for management only)
- Diversity recruitment, outreach and head hunter efforts
- Affirmative Action Plans
- Strong affiliation & collaboration with Department of Education and Oregon Education Systems for school-to-work programs – minority students are enrolling in Oregon colleges, do we have college-to-career planning strategies to hire minority students enrolled at Oregon universities?
- Strong coaching and mentoring programs to realize higher levels of minority representation in cabinet and executive management positions
- Strong HR & Diversity Unit ties with other states’ public sector offices wealthy with persons of color in executive management positions to gain knowledge and more best practices...they’ve been there and done it – learning from them could benefit the department
- A work environment that is friendly to all employees irrespective of individual beliefs and ethnic, religious, national or racial backgrounds
- An environment that helps promote mutual respect and trust among all employees
- An environment that helps promote understanding and appreciation of various different cultures and backgrounds
- An environment that helps its employees look at diversity as a strength and not as a weakness
- An environment that provides equal growth opportunities to all employees
- An environment that provides opportunities where employees are motivated to share new ideas

- An environment that will help employees become more proactive
- People with different backgrounds need different kinds of motivations. By having a better understanding of various backgrounds we create an environment that will provide opportunities for employees to advance their career, be proactive, be more efficient and in turn help the organization become more efficient
- Discouraging employees from stereotyping other employees based on religious, ethnic or other backgrounds
- Sharing and understanding of values which help build bridges rather than islands among employees
- Good supervision, clear expectations, constant feedback,
- Honest conversations, tools to succeed.
- Ongoing training that is relevant to the job
- Valuing diversity and the uniqueness of persons
- Being aware of staff's needs to succeed and providing opportunities for developing skills
- Creating and sustaining environments that are free of biases and discrimination. Having no tolerance for derogatory comments.
- Holding managers and staff accountable for diversity friendly practices.

**Following are a few things that we can do to provide a welcoming environment for people with disabilities:**

- Offer and/or ask if an accommodation is needed, rather than waiting until a request is made. Often we can ask a simple question like “Is there anything we can do to make this situation more workable for you?” The key is to then accept any feedback and act upon it appropriately. In addition, use each and every opportunity as a “lesson learned” and be prepared to offer this and other accommodations as necessary in similar or future situations.
- Far too often, if and when a person with a disability asks for accommodation, or asks an entity to change its approach, they are met with explanations, excuses, arguments etc. as to why the entity has not (has no intention of) making the change. We need to be willing to hear the changes that are asked for because they are probably needed. We need to follow through with making those changes.
- Make physical and architectural changes to our facilities. We need to understand that the “mythology” of “ADA accessibility” is just that – a myth. In many cases

even our newest facilities do not meet accessibility code 100%. Even if they did, that “meets code” designation is only in the eyes of the local building inspector who probably has no end-user experience with elements of accessibility. Some tips:

1. Move the garbage can(s) well away from the latch-side (door handle) of the door(s). This allows people with mobility devices to use the space that was intended for access. The space on the latch side of the door is not to be taken up by the trash receptacle.
2. Move the garbage can(s) well away from the buttons that activate power-assisted doors. That space by the buttons was intended for access.
3. Test power assisted doors on a daily basis.
4. When the power assisted door is not working, don't blame it on the “kids or the clients.” Instead get the power assistance working again as soon as possible.
5. Make sure the lowered-counter spaces in the reception area are staffed for reception and not used as storage space for printed or other types of materials.
6. Make sure that the lowered-counter spaces are low enough to be used by the end-user (customer/client) and are not at the maximum allowable height according to code. When a lowered counter is at the maximum allowable height it probably is not accessible to the average end-user.
7. Make sure that the phone in the lobby reception area is located on the lowered-counter space. As long as we keep it in the higher counter we probably have also shortened the cord so it doesn't reach the lower counter anyway.
8. When putting furniture -including chairs and tables – and people, into a waiting room, conference room, training room or other areas in our facilities, test the space to make sure that people who use crutches, canes, walkers, wheelchairs or other mobility devices will have “access into and through the space” once the room is filled to capacity.
9. In waiting areas, leave spaces alongside the other chairs and or tables that would allow a person who uses a wheelchair to sit alongside, and in the same manner as others who will be in the waiting room. We often “line the walls” of our rooms with tables and chairs so a person who uses a mobility device must sit in the walkway or open area. This is an uncomfortable situation in which to place a person.

## 2. What practices have you implemented, or have experienced, that have contributed to the creation of a welcoming environment in DHS or other government organizations?

- Authentic Conversations with Manager.
- Cultural sensitivity in management styles, employee feedback and disciplinary actions.
- Creation of African-American Strategic Team
- Development of local (SDA wide) Recruitment and Relation Manager position.
- Hiring of diverse employees (gender, ages, disability, race, etc.);
- Build relationships with staff: Attend their non-work related functions as able and appropriate. Take interest in them as people. Allow myself to be vulnerable.
- Consider impact of policies and procedures on diverse populations in individual and group decisions and meetings.
- Set a tone of acceptance of others; address behaviors, actions or attitudes that can be perceived to be discriminatory.
- Creating a buddy for the first week or so.
- Have a schedule/strategy to bring someone in and sharing that with the person. Spending time with staff who share resources, take them on visits to partners.
- Having ongoing branch activities that bring people together to share experiences and cultural differences.
- Checking with folks. Creating opportunities for them to let you know how it's going.
- Connecting folks to mentors or peers.
- Coaching folks on the cultural norms of the workplace.
- Relevant diversity training for staff and managers to make them aware of expectations and providing tools to succeed.
- Management is held accountable for providing welcoming environments
- Hiring of diverse and bilingual staff that is culturally competent
- Culturally competent customer service
- Retention practices and mentoring programs
- Partnerships with diverse groups

- Involvement with community organizations
- Constant feedback and review of practices with goals to improve employment and service practices

Recognize that we all have bias. We all believe that we are doing the right thing. At the very least we are often carrying out what we have been told is the right way to address a situation. Especially in state government we often are responding in outmoded ways or in a manner that is based on old and outdated information, information that was formulated without consulting the people who are directly affected by our behavior.

When someone who is different from us points out that they think we should be doing something different we may tend to be defensive and attribute ill to the person who is challenging our current point of view. That's when we need to acknowledge the humanity of the person to whom we are speaking and also to listen to things they have to say, no matter how difficult it may be for us to hear. Chances are we can learn something useful. At the very least we can learn what it is that they think will make the environment more welcoming to them and other people like them.