

ATTRACTING AND KEEPING THE BEST BY KENNETH "BUZZ" SHAW

EMBRACE DIVERSITY



Those highlighted in this edition of the CNY Business Exchange are impressive people. More high achievers from all kinds of backgrounds are out there if we examine how we do things and focus on expanding our applicant pools and improving the work environment.

In a highly competitive world economy we can ill afford to have hang-ups that prevent us from seeing the potential of others.

It is not only an issue of fairness. It is about economic competitiveness. A diverse work place makes good business sense. But how do we ensure that we are on the right track?

Here are three factors to keep in mind: Understanding and abiding by discrimination laws, practicing tolerance and appreciation for others and eliminating institutional barriers.

Discrimination Laws. Many forms of discrimination are now illegal. Today federal and state laws, most notably the Civil Rights Acts and Affirmative Action Guidelines, give us guidance,

but it is not enough to know about them. It is our responsibility as leaders to educate our people and deal quickly and effectively with violations. The penalties for violation can be severe and often quite embarrassing. Understanding Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act is essential as it defines sexual harassment and gives examples of actions which "unreasonably interfere with an individual's work performance, or create an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment." Know and apply the rules and demand the same from your employees.

Tolerance and Appreciation.

This is the ability to respect the differences and similarities of the people we work with and to find great value in what each person brings to the table. How do we do this? Certainly, education programs, celebrating cultural events, and social opportunities help. But by far, the best way to promote tolerance and appreciation is to have a common purpose, which unites people to work together as equals. This does more to achieve diversity objectives than all good intentions. It is why the military, athletics, orchestras, drama groups and the like seem to do better in promoting tolerance and appreciation. One of these nights rent the movie "Remember the Titans." It depicts the integration of schools in a Virginia city in the early 1970s. Citizens thought they had little in common except their distrust of one another; this included the football team, which now had both black and white players. Coach Herman Boone, played by Denzel Washington, focused solely on winning, doing the things in and out of practice that would make them competitive. Black and white players formed close friendships and the town rallied around them. Pursuing a goal together brought them victory. Tolerance and appreciation followed.

Eliminating institutional barriers. Such barriers keep us from get-

ting the most from our labor force, not a good thing if we want to remain in the race. Here is a partial list. For women in particular, but not limited to them, we could include the opportunity for day care for young children, flexible hours and working at home (an increasing trend for many employees). Health benefits for gay couples help to attract and retain gay employees.

Not sure where to start? Begin by inviting small groups of employees and demand from them unafraid plain talk. What barriers do they see to personal advancement and that of the firm? If you aren't getting any ideas, have someone else talk to a sample of employees one on one. The barriers are out there and will be revealed if employees believe they will not be punished or seen as complainers for their views. Then, decide which barriers are in your best interest to improve and go at it.

At the end of the day, a diverse work force will make us more competitive in a world economy. By understanding and enforcing discrimination laws, creating environments where common goals are pursued and people are valued for their contributions, and by working to identify and improve institutional barriers, we can attract and keep the best employees and better position ourselves for success. **E**

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Kenneth A. "Buzz" Shaw also makes his expertise available to the public through his Web site, <http://whitman.syr.edu/shaw/>, which includes videos, articles, podcasts, speeches and presentations for leaders and business professionals.

Have a question about leadership for expert Kenneth Shaw, send an e-mail to jcreighton@syracuse.com and he will respond in an upcoming issue.