



LORAIN KASPRZAK

ADVANTAGE MARKETING CONSULTING SERVICES

## Leading a Diverse Team

Last summer, I visited a client who runs a NJ-based engineering and manufacturing firm. He knows I'm a foodie, so he shared photos from his company's Independence Day office party. Picture after picture showed Greek, Indian, Jamaican, Puerto Rican, Italian, and Japanese dishes — all homemade by the employees. He commented that in the past they would have ordered six-foot hero sandwiches, but now that the firm has so many employees from diverse backgrounds, they use July 4th as an opportunity to celebrate everyone's culture by sharing traditional foods.

The diversity of this firm illustrates a larger trend: The U.S. workforce is more racially and ethnically diverse than ever before. According to a Pew Research Center report on demographic trends, the U.S. will not have a racial or ethnic majority by 2055. This is good news for companies and employees alike, says Simone Sloan, a business strategist and executive coach who trains companies in diversity and inclusion practices. "Research has shown that companies that build an inclusive culture, with individuals from different cultures and backgrounds, have higher market share, better brand visibility, and an increased ability to serve a diverse population. Their employees are more engaged and there's lower employee turnover," says Sloan.

"When diversity is part of your company's hiring practices, you've set your company up to hire the best and the brightest talent," adds Don McDermott, principal of D. G. McDermott Associates. He continues, "Having formal diversity and inclusion policies is also important to your community and public relations."

While having a diverse workforce is good business, leading a diverse team presents unique challenges. Marc Clithero, a process consultant for the North Caspian Operating Co. (NCOC), recalls his experience working in Kazakhstan: "My team included individuals with many different nationalities and regional differences within the same nationality. You couldn't use the 'this is how things were done everywhere else' approach. Everywhere else was not here!"

Follow this advice to lead diverse teams that will succeed now and in the future.

**Look beyond the surface.** Diversity is more than just cultural and racial differences. A diverse team can be built of employees of different ages, genders, religious and political beliefs, education, socioeconomic backgrounds, and sexual orientations. Sloan suggests considering the iceberg model to help you think about these attributes: "What you see on the surface may be someone's accent or appearance. But, below that are their skills and competencies, and then at a deeper level, other characteristics like family dynamics,

cultural values and sensitivities, and gender preferences."

**Be aware of your biases.** Before interacting with people who are different from you, take a moment and ask yourself what assumptions you might be making about them. Test those assumptions and adjust your approach. "Explore what you may have in common. This can help reduce your unconscious bias and bond with that person," says Ray Henson, an organizational and management consultant and licensed psychologist.

**Cultivate trust.** "When you want to engage diverse individuals in your team's mission, think TCC — trust, connection, and collaboration," says Sloan. "It starts with trust, because if you don't trust the people you're working with, you're not going to connect and collaborate with them." A good tactic for building trust is to talk to each employee privately about group goals and expectations and, in your conversation, be open to learning about them as individuals.

**Be open-minded and curious.** "What works for one culture or group of people will not necessarily work for another. You have to be receptive to new ideas to find common ground in each case," says Clithero. Start by asking your team questions and listening to their answers. "You can ask questions in a way that is sensitive to differences and helps your team members feel valued," says Sloan. "For example, you can say, 'I'm really curious about ... and I'm wondering if you can help me,' or 'I'm interested in what you think about ...'."

**Learn to integrate differences.** Team members will approach a project or problem from different perspectives. Effective leaders are open to these various viewpoints and do not assume one is better than another. Integrate different perspectives by encouraging team input and discussion and allowing time for the team to think about and discuss ideas without rushing to a solution.

**Ensure your team has the right skills.** Your team may have good technical skills, but members also need to have the right balance of cognitive and interpersonal skills. "Team members should have opportunities to build their collaboration skills and their ability to understand and deal with differences. This helps the team work together to accomplish its goals," says Henson.

**Tap into AIChE resources.** The AIChE Foundation sponsors societal impact sessions for women, young professionals, minorities, engineers with disabilities, and the LGBTQ+ community at AIChE Spring and Annual Meetings. These sessions provide chemical engineers with opportunities to join the discussion and expand their understanding of diversity and inclusion.

CEP