

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnerships, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics

USDA Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

Social Sciences
Team

How to Improve Diversity on Your Team

Recruiting people of different skills, backgrounds, and ethnicity is a positive method of enhancing creativity and promoting broad ideas. An ethnically and culturally diverse team has a variety of experiences, perspectives and expertise that can yield more profound, comprehensive, and powerful solutions than working in homogeneous settings. Valuing diversity means being aware of, sensitive to, and appreciating differences such as ethnicity, national origin, age, gender, race, culture, physical abilities, sexual orientation, and lifestyles. This fact sheet will provide you with a few simple ideas to help you identify and meet specific diversity goals.

Who Needs This Information?

A significant challenge the conservation partnership faces is to continue to build and recruit a diverse workforce. The partnership customer base is growing more diverse everyday. This information can help you achieve diversity on state technical committees, conservation district boards, Resource Development and Conservation councils, and whenever you are forming a conservation team or committee. It can also be useful when trying to expand your Earth Team program or when you need to hire a new employee.



What is Diversity?

When we hear the word ‘diversity’ most of us think of multiculturalism or civil rights issues. However, diversity is actually a much larger concept. Diversity is the vast collection of physical and cultural components that make us different from each other. This includes ethnicity, ideology, religious beliefs, organizational ties, disability, personality, culture, skills, personal experiences, and so many other things that it would be impossible to list them all. Allowing for these differences can help to ensure that there is broad representation of skills, ideologies, and experiences.

Many people tend to limit diversity to demographics, color, gender, and/or age. However, individuals and groups can differ in many ways, some obvious and others more subtle.

Diversity is also based on informational differences, reflecting a person’s education and experience, as well as in the values or goals that can influence a person’s perceptions. Achieving true diversity within a group can be a challenge, however, because people sometimes find it difficult to get along socially and/or professionally with individuals who have different feelings, ideas, and backgrounds.

Every culture has its own unique perceptions and these differ from situation to situation. In fact, people have their own unique abilities. It is often said that America’s diversity has given the country its unique strength, resilience, and richness. Without diversity, we would all be the same.

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Why is Diversity Important?

More organizational leaders understand the need for having diverse members in their ranks because it aids the organization's competitiveness in global markets. An increasing number of people are seeking multicultural environments in areas such as: education, workplace, and community. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the current minority population is 29.1 percent of the total population. In 19 years it is projected to increase to 40 percent. These current and projected changes have resulted in a gradual shift from merely accepting diversity to valuing it.

Diversity is achievable if people are willing to objectively assess diversity within their organization. If diversity is found to be lacking, an organization should consciously commit to and initiate changes that will result in greater diversity. Leaders are responsible for beginning the process by supporting and committing to the concept of increased diversity. When an organizational unit has diversity as a goal, current processes that do not promote inclusion should be identified and modified in ways that support this goal.

Every organization or agency has a distinctive climate or atmosphere that reveals itself in many different ways. People outside of the organization will often observe your organization's values and priorities and these perceptions will help determine whether they will or will not be affiliated with your organization. Simply put, those organizations that value and exhibit diversity will be more successful in attracting diverse members than those that do not.

Diversity can create better performance when it comes to tasks such as project development, implementation, and execution. Leaders can reap the benefits of innovation and fresh ideas by using diverse teams. This would include developing new ways of attracting diverse customers.

Researchers at Stanford Business School have found that different assessments and points of view can create debate, which allows people to deliberate about the best course of action. This is the type of constructive conflict that is needed in some group settings to instigate frank and open discussions. An atmosphere open to diversity gives people the opportunity to offer their personal feelings, share their unique cultural perspective, and create a sense of belonging with the group. This approach also helps to develop a sense of trust within the group. When the level of trust is high, it is easier for groups to work together. Leaders should strive to: nurture self identity, promote interactions among people who are different in order to learn from each other, identify and understand their own bias, and work to eliminate the presence and/or perception of bias within their organization.



Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS

What Strategies Enhance Diversity?¹

- Assess the demographics of your board/committee to see if it is representative of your community, county, city, watershed, and/or RC&D area's general population.
- Provide resources (funding, training, and/or information) on diversity to your team, committee or work group; without it, they may not be in a position to assist during the recruitment process. Some sources for information include your state special emphasis program managers, employee organizations, and social science coordinators. There are many publications, videos, and web sites that show the many faces of diversity.
- Acquire many different diversity plans to aid you in developing a thematic diversity statement of your own. Under this statement, set formal goals and develop strategies to reach those goals.
- Cultivate organizational partnerships with groups that cater to the needs and interests of diverse audiences (e.g. people of color, women, the disabled, etc.). If no local groups exist, develop partnerships with state, regional, and/or national organizations.
- Develop formal relationships with schools that have a diverse student body. This association will help you cultivate talent for the future.
- Enlist the help of community leaders. Encourage people of different cultures, languages, ethnic backgrounds, and beliefs to assist your organization by asking them to provide names of possible recruits. Also, ask them to make presentations to your team, committee, or local work group on the issues that are most important to them.

Strategies that Enhance Diversity con't...

- Incorporate nontraditional networking channels to reach diverse audiences (for example foreign language press, places of worship, and community based organizations' newsletters).
- Develop written statements that reflect the diversity that you wish to attain. Include articles on diversity in your publications and presentations making sure you communicate the message that your committee/board/office is friendly and accessible to all.
- Ensure that any outside speakers and authors you use are diverse themselves and are aware of and respectful to all readers and audiences.
- Share your diversity recruitment and retention achievements with similar organizations.

What Recruitment Strategies Can be Used?²

Recruiting and developing a diverse team can be challenging. It requires creativity and a willingness to explore new and sometimes uncharted alternatives. Perhaps that is why so many organizations back off and find excuses not to proceed with their diversity efforts. Often times, however, locating people with diverse backgrounds can be achieved without changing your expectations, or spending exorbitant amounts of money and time tracking them down. Try these strategies to find the people you're looking for:

Cultivate Relationships with Diverse Communities

Spend time developing relationships within diverse communities. Learn the best and most favored communication methods they utilize. If, for example, you are seeking Latino professionals, make the effort to get to know newspaper editors, community leaders, church officials, political leaders, educators and business leaders within the Latino community. The National Organization of Professional Hispanic NRCS Employees is also a good source of information. Your efforts to network can build the kind of trust that will make the very finest recruits receptive to working with you.

Advertise in Foreign-Language Media

One way, for example, to advertise for Earth Team volunteers is through foreign-language newspapers, periodicals, radio, and web sites to attract people from diverse cultures. Why? People assume that those who read foreign-language papers are not bilingual. However, many English-speaking professionals access media in their own language, because it is familiar and keeps them in touch with their native, secondary or joint culture. This will enhance your chances of adding a top-notch bilingual professional to your team.

Utilize Current Staff to Expand Membership

One of the most creative strategies to increase membership of diverse people is to use the resources within your organization: current staff and members. Put the word out that you are seeking high-quality people of all backgrounds. Invite current staff to approach friends and acquaintances and to keep an eye out at professional and personal meetings for potential members.

One word of caution regarding these outreach strategies: make it very clear to all concerned that you are not lowering requirements or any other standard to diversify your team, committee, board, or work team with someone of a particular race, ethnicity, gender or age. **Diversity does not and should not require the lowering of requirements. If that happens, you have placed your diversity program in jeopardy and you have sent the wrong message.**

¹Source: Cross Cultural Communications www.thiederma.com

²Ibid.



Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS.

Additional Diversity Strategies³

- Emphasize the “worthy cause” aspect of conservation to assist in recruitment
- Assure prospective recruits their schedules can be accommodated
- Directly and respectfully ask diverse people to serve on your board/committee
- Ask local leaders to serve or recommend others to serve
- Recruit through interpersonal contacts.
- Assign a person to be responsible for recruiting
- Provide a fact/tip sheet to all staff on steps to recruiting
- Use board/committee members as public spokespeople
- Keep in mind higher education, professional ranks, and students are fertile recruitment sources
- Recruit retired people, especially those recently retired. Many of these people may not be fully aware of the excellent work achieved by your board/committee/work team
- Speak/make presentations about your committee to local civic groups. Be prepared to put these recruits to work
- Make sure you ask people what they are interested in doing and assign those duties when possible
- Present special awards to minority groups who are making progress in achieving diverse organizational goals
- Host a program and have different ethnic groups bring and share different cultural foods. This type of function usually breaks down barriers.

What Retention Strategies Can be Used?⁴

It is important to create a climate of professional learning and growth. Most people feel challenged when they can gain knowledge and develop new skills and/or share their past experiences to help solve community issues. This environment keeps them interested and motivated, which in turn increases retention.

When dealing with retention issues it important to have open communication. This facilitates feedback and allows team members to say what they like and do not like about the team environment as well as what they need in order to be a successful part of the team. It is essential to be clear on team members’ responsibilities, to demonstrate trust and to empower them to be productive.

Additional strategies include:

- Treat all members time as you treat your own
- Be well organized
- Be considerate
- Recognize, recognize, and recognize. Rewards do not have to be large, but people like to be appreciated
- Have team meetings that review goals and accomplishments
- Assign direct responsibilities



Where can I find more information?

CAB Multimarketing Resource Center. <http://www.cabletvadbureau.com/mmrc/why.html/>

Lahiri, Indra. "How to retain executives" *Workforce Development Group*. 2001.

STRATEGIES <http://www.co.lane.or.us/HR/STRATEGIES.htm>

The HRnext.com Team. "Diversity Can Improve Decision Making" 2002.

Thiederman, Sondra. "Recruit the Best: Gain Access to a Diverse Workforce"
<http://equalopportunity.digitalcity.monster.com/articles/recruit/>

Thiederman, Sondra. "Why Diversity Counts: The Business Case"
<http://equalopportunity.monster.com/articles/bizcase/>

"What are Some Strategies for Recruiting and Retaining a Diverse Workforce?" 2002.
<http://www.shrm.org/diversity/recruitretain.htm>

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