

Discovering Gold with Affinity Groups

An interview with Terry Howard, Director of Diversity @ Texas Instruments

Business Resource Groups – that’s the new name Terry Howard, Diversity Director at Texas Instruments, believes should ultimately emerge for what are now known as Affinity Groups, Diversity Initiatives or Special Interest Groups. Why change the name? “At this point in the evolution of diversity, we must take care in the selection of words to send the right messages,” Howard says. “We simply cannot continue to use old words to describe new paradigms, new possibilities and new realities,”

Affinity groups have emerged in the American workplace as a standard component of diversity initiatives. For many companies with a strong top-level commitment to diversity, the benefits of affinity groups have grown over time from the primary intent - to provide a forum in which members of an organization who share common interests, issues or concerns could meet to address those issues – to multi-faceted benefits that impact recruitment, retention, marketing and customer relations.

“Not everyone in the general population is fully on board in understanding the significant business impact employee diversity groups can have on the organization in the way we are at TI,” said Howard who admits to being amazed by the number of people who continue to see the groups in purely social – and very often, exclusive - terms.

“The strong social and psychological needs at the core of the interest in belonging to a group exists and should be met with sanctioned diversity groups,” says Howard. “However, the groups themselves may have to do a better job at communicating how they are aligned with and advancing the business.” The responsibility on the side of the organization, says Howard, is to change its no-value-added mindset when it comes to employee diversity groups once they see the evidence. “There’s no question that we’re talking about a shared responsibility here,”

When pressed to provide examples of how diversity groups can make an impact, Terry Howard was quick to rattle off several.

“I can recall a situation back in the late eighties in Denver where another organization I worked for struggled to sell its new private branch exchange communication system in Asia.” said Howard who further points out that the development and marketing team had no Asians on them. “A significant turn in events occurred when members of the organization’s Asian diversity group stepped in and helped the organization land several multi-million dollar contracts.” With a laugh Terry went on to say, “This is the very same organization that fought so vigorously to keep diversity groups out!”

Howard is familiar with diversity success stories at companies across the nation, from Chicago to Dallas.

He reported on an African American group at a company in Chicago that aggressively marketed its customer “win back” weekend in the greater Chicago area. The event attracted large numbers of participants to view the company’s product display. “As a result,” Howard said, “scores of former customers switched back and many new customers signed up as well.” That company now has many diversity groups in place.

Employee diversity groups can also be greatly beneficial in the area of customer relations as well, particularly for culturally diverse customers. A Texas Instruments employee diversity group offers a prime example by its recent hosting of a large customer from another country and culture.

“Members of our initiative availed themselves to meet with the customer contingent and fielded a number of extremely important business and relationship-based questions that were important to the customer,” Terry explained. “And we’re not talking about ‘chump change’ here – we’re talking about a **multi-million** dollar customer who left with an extremely positive impression of the company.”

Unanticipated Benefits *“When you shut people and groups out, you ought to be asking yourself what else could I be shutting out in terms of unanticipated benefits? In what other ways does the enterprise lose when voices of diversity are not valued and heard, when key perspectives and insights are not brought to the table? From a business standpoint, these questions ought to make all of us a little uncomfortable.”*

-- Terry Howard, Diversity Director at Texas Instruments.

Perhaps most important of all have been what Howard calls “the unanticipated benefits” ----- the ways in which employees contribute in ways the organization probably never even realized.

Last year, Texas Instruments recognized a faith-based initiative. “When some people first heard about this, the thought of faith and religion in the workplace did concern them somewhat,” admitted Howard. “However, what that new initiative brought to the table was another valuable perspective and connection, one we would have lost out on had we said no.” For example, post - Sept. 11, the group provided an outlet for people who needed some prayer time, some quiet time, some quality time for personal reflection. And there are other benefits as well.

In the hallways of Texas Instruments, you can’t help but notice the towering figure of Kent Johnson. The 6’11” TI attorney leads the faith-based initiative. “Sure, faith is certainly Kent’s passion, but he brings much more to the table than just that,” said Howard. “The danger is that if we pigeon hole him as the faith-based leader exclusively

and leave him there, we run the risk of losing out on his passion for and contributions to other aspects of the business.” Beyond the faith-based initiative, Kent Johnson has been one of the key developers of the diversity team’s new customer focus resource tool. “I shudder to think how much we would have lost had we said no to people like Kent Johnson and the perspective and skills they bring to the table.” said Howard.

So, what’s next on the horizon for affinity groups? Will new ones continue to emerge?

“I’m not certain what’s on the horizon,” said Texas Instruments’ Diversity Director. “I will say however, that if I’m approached about sanctioning new ones – and I fully anticipate that’s going to happen – I’ll be even more likely to say ‘yes!’ based on what I know about both the personal value and the enormous potential business benefit diversity groups have to offer!”

Terry Howard was interviewed by Tasnim McCormick Benhalim, a member of the Dallas HR Diversity Committee and founder and principal of DiversityWealth®, a Dallas-area firm that partners with organizations to design and implement initiatives that link diversity with business objectives.