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DIVERSITY

TRAIN TO GAIN

Businesses find that diversity training for employees helps their bottom line grow

BY JEFF ZBAR

With 26,000 employees nationwide, it's a safe bet the Ryder System has a diverse workforce. But do the employees know what working among such "diversity" means?

Executives there leave nothing to chance. For years, the company has held diversity training for its employees. In 2012, it will launch a new training program that's being designed to highlight each employee's place among a diverse workplace and the roles of engagement and employee connections for engagement and innovation, said Amparo Bared, the company's VP of talent management.

"Every employee plays a role in shifting culture," she said. "It's more than just gender and race. That's why inclusion is important. It's a whole cultural shift."

For companies of all sizes, diversity training can help increase employees' and managers' cultural awareness, knowledge and skills. Research has shown that diversity training can also improve the workplace climate, enhance diversity among project teams, and ultimately improve satisfaction, reduce conflicts and improve employee retention.

In a market like South Florida, where diversity is rich with multinational cultures and ethnicities, training can help companies and workers gain sensitivity to issues of culture and communications.

"This is a narrow topic, but an important one to understand," said Angelo Filippi, a partner in employment and labor law at Kelley Kronenberg in Fort Lauderdale.

Not all necessarily agree. Several companies contacted for this story declined to participate, claiming the presence of diverse workforces reduced the need for diversity training.

Such a view is "mixing apples and oranges," Filippi said.

It's one thing to be diverse in the make-up of a staff, to recruit appropriately or to hire qualified individuals regardless of ethnicity, he said. "It's another thing to be able to communicate and be sensitive to issues that may arise as a result of the diversity of your staff. They have to know how to deal with those issues. That's what diversity training is all about."

TRAINING IS FORMALIZED

At Ryder, training includes formalized, four- or eight-hour classroom sessions held on-site for all employees; remote employees view a DVD of the course. A manager course helps managers and supervisors develop their own competencies in a diverse workplace, she said. Executives also redefined their own view of diversity away from a compliance function that mitigates risk to one that further embraces various points of view, Bared said.

Though there's no government requirement for diversity training, such training may help companies defend against claims of workplace harassment, Filippi said. A workplace with policies, training and materials distributed relating to equal opportunity, zero tolerance for harassment and rights of employees of protected groups, for example, "will have a defense in claims of harassment," he said.

"Title VII of the Civil Rights Act doesn't say you must train or have a policy. It just says you must not discriminate," he said. "But is [training] prudent and create defenses? Absolutely."

Defense wasn't the reason Jupiter Medical Center launched its Relationship Based Care employee-training program for its 1,500 team members, said John Wolf, VP of human resources. The intention was to create cohesion among employees and patients.

For three eight-hour days, 30 students from across the hospital learn together how to get along better with patients and co-workers – especially those from across the cultural, socioeconomic and workforce spectrum, he said. So far, the hospital has spent

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Amparo Bared | Ryder System

more than \$100,000 on the program, which was developed by Chicago-based Creative Healthcare Management. Six employees trained to deliver the program internally; each participant leaves with a Commitment to Caring card for his or her wallet.

Wolf doesn't know whether that card would lower the hospital's insurance rates or have some other financial benefit. He hopes improved patient interactions will help the hospital maintain already high patient satisfaction survey results and patient recommendations. The training also may help the hospital achieve Magnet Status from the American Nurses Credentialing Center when it applies next year.

Ryder's Bared said: "You do these things because it makes good business sense. It's not a program. It's just a way of doing business."

Such training often reflects an "employer of choice" among progressive companies – places where equal opportunity is a closely held belief from the top down, rather than a governmental mandate, said Sharon Kastelic, director of training for HR services with Oasis Outsourcing in West Palm Beach.

"Diversity brings value to the organization," said Kastelic, who has overseen training for companies ranging from four to 4,000 employees. "It's hard to measure. It can raise retention, employee engagement and help people feel comfortable to speak up or participate."

"I hope this will translate into statistics like quality, people working together and not saying, 'That's not my job,'" said Wolf, who took the on-site class himself earlier this year. "Diversity training isn't just having to come to our class and talk about gender or race. It's really part of the culture."