

MONICA C. SMITH



Just Say No to Quotas Engagement is the Key to Diversity

My goal in life is to make a difference in this world. Marketsmith's company motto is: "We do great work so we can do good things." Being "inclusive" or "diverse" fits our definition of "doing good," and goes beyond my business philosophy into the foundation of my family.

My wife and I have a wonderful patchwork of gender, race and delivery mechanism with six children; five black and one white. None of it by design, but rather from an openness to receive.

Recently, I had a conversation with our daughter after she attended a teen panel for bi-racial families with gay parents. Thinking she might have questions, I asked, "What did you think of the panel?" She answered, "It was good; they talked about things no one ever talks about."

Having a perfect opening, I said, "I'm sure it's hard for you that Mom and I are gay." She quickly replied, "Mom, I don't care that you're gay." Then, just a heartbeat later, she said, "I just really care that you're white."

The conversation made me realize that how we navigate inclusion to ensure diversity is very personal and very sensitive. Even the best of intentions, like mine with my child, can be off. Where in my mind the challenge was having two

moms, the issue in her mind was color. This kind of disconnect is hard to overcome.

Navigating Inclusion

So, what do we do in life and business when dealing with differences as we work toward inclusion? Like my family, my hiring for diversity was never planned. We hired smart, unusual people who wanted to make a difference in the world. Then, someone asked for our census. Never having done one before, we were amazed at our own diversity! We are made up of 54% women, 34% millennials and 25% minorities.

Why? Because we were open to people whose only real commonality was their values, not their ages, race or backgrounds.

For example, I was looking for someone with experience in financial technology and met Anil. I thought he was overqualified, a typical millennial, and he had zero experience for the role. He came

from a big six accounting firm, went back to college, and then became an administration counselor. To an HR person, all are major red flags.

Yet, I saw someone that wanted to embrace people, loved the concept of technology, and volunteered to build homes for people in Nepal.

I related to him on an intuitive level and gave him a shot. It went against logic, but he's one of our strongest hires!

Hiring people like Anil who don't "fit," is one of the most powerful tools my organization has. It's given us the ability to harness and innovate using diversity of thought. As a result, we are stronger, more competitive and able to meet new challenges with a variety of approaches.

Just Say No to Formulas

Forget formulas. I'm suggesting we all examine the lenses we look through by questioning our personal barriers so we can go up and over them. Only then can our organizations do the same.

This is the revelation I had after talking to my daughter. I realized that despite my best efforts, even I was looking through the wrong lens. I believed her issue was that I was gay. That's my issue. Her issue is that I'm white.

Dialog is the Key

Great hiring decisions are the result of serious dialog. A dialog is what my daughter and I had. It went beyond the superficial. She felt safe with me and expressed her true feelings, and I listened without repercussions.

I'm suggesting we abandon quotas and look beyond the resume to truly engage with a person, listen to them, and allow it to challenge our internal biases.

Practice Makes Perfect

So, how do you move beyond barriers and open yourself up to genuine dialog?

Start with your family, your neighborhood, your church and then, only then, your organization.

Don't schedule an interview or a meeting. Schedule a walk or a cup of coffee. Look past the style and seek substance. Avoid the usual questions about their resume and ask about their hopes, needs and dreams.

It may be uncomfortable and daunting, but so what! It will uncover gems, and when you take your census, you'll be pleasantly surprised. I see the reality of this approach each day in my family and my business. None of it planned, but all part of a greater design.

That is true inclusion and the only way it will happen is if we all start to practice at every step of our own personal and professional journeys, without fail, until it becomes intrinsically who we are.

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