

What Good Is Diversity? By Christina Smalls

“Diversity and independence are important because the best collective decisions are the product of disagreement and contest, not consensus or compromise.” ~ James Surowiecki

What good is diversity? Diversity is a reflection of the world we live in and it gives us a view of life from the perspective of different people; an opportunity to learn about the experiences of others. A 2004 study conducted at the University of Michigan and Loyola Chicago found that “creating groups of individuals who had diverse approaches to problem solving outperformed groups that were made up of only the most talented problem-solvers.” Representation matters and having diverse representation affords the opportunity to bring in new ideas and viewpoints. Leadership and committee involvement should be reflective of your membership demographics.

What does diversity really mean?

Just hearing the word “diversity” can sometimes cause resentment or contention. Is it the word itself, or the perceived motivation behind the word? Merriam-Webster defines diversity as “the condition of having or being composed of differing elements; the inclusion of different types of people in a group or organization; an instance of being composed of differing elements or qualities.” In the association world, diversity refers to more than race/ethnicity, it also encompasses: gender; religion; sexual orientation; age; physical ability; area of expertise/practice; familial status; personal history; socioeconomic status; backgrounds; geographic area; and political viewpoints. When considering the diversity of your memberships’ participation ask yourself, “which one of these groups, if any, is currently unrepresented?”

Why associations should consider becoming more diverse

Ideally, we should all consider varying viewpoints when planning for the future of our associations and avoid the assumption that the current perspectives are the only perspectives. Communicating with people from varying backgrounds, generations, political beliefs, and the like can help each of us consider issues from a different angle, which can bring about innovative decision making and creative problem solving. In the October 2014 Scientific American article “How Diversity Makes Us Smarter” author Katherine W. Phillips states: “Simply adding social diversity to a group makes people believe that differences of perspective might exist among them and that belief makes people change their behavior.” Associations would be well served to ensure that their committee participation and leadership represents a broad range of their membership. However, make sure that you are not just trying to fill a quota, but choosing people that are qualified and bring a unique viewpoint to the committee or leadership position.

An association has the opportunity for continued growth if they start to look at including unrepresented segments of their membership in various roles in the organization. In your efforts to promote more diversity in your association’s leadership, committee participation and overall membership, encourage members to investigate the different committees and explore how they may

be able to contribute to the success of the association. Additionally, current leaders should reach out to some of the unrepresented segments of membership and inquire about their interest in either participating on a committee or in a leadership position in the future. Perhaps you might consider starting a mentoring program in which members of the leadership team mentor a member who has not been previously involved in the association's committees or events, in an effort to make sure the member feels welcomed at the association and comfortable participating in events.

Diversity and millennials

Millennials (born approximately between 1980 and 2000) are the most diverse generation in the nation's history. By 2025, 60 to 75 percent of the workforce will be made up of members of the millennial generation. A member from the millennial generation may look at the members of an existing committee and think "that is a group of people who have years of business experience, what input can I provide with only one year of experience?" In a study by Deloitte and the Billie Jean King Leadership Initiative of 3,700 individuals spanning different generations, races and genders Christie Smith, one of the study's authors stated, about millennials, "this generation is already comfortable with the idea of diversity in a traditional sense and they're looking to expand the definition, which could be a good thing."

Millennials might come in with a new set of ideas that can spark creativity or a conversation that leads to an innovative way of launching a new program or event; or have a method of streamlining processes through new technology. One way of getting millennials involved at your association is by forming a Young Professionals Network (YPN) group and sponsoring networking functions and other activities for younger professionals. Through this YPN you can get the members' ideas on how they would like to become more involved in the association. NAR has information on how you can form a YPN group at your association.

Conclusion

Do not assume that one person from a particular demographic group represents and speaks for the entire demographic. People should feel that their individual voices are being heard and that they are not expected to conform and go along with the majority. We should embrace each person sincerely, not as a symbol but as an equal with a unique viewpoint.

By no means do I want you to walk away from reading this and feel obligated or pressured; your association's may already be representative of your area's demographic. However, I hope after reading this article you at least ask yourself "am I fostering an environment where everyone feels welcomed and valued?" If the answer is no, then hopefully you can incorporate one of the above ideas into your selection processes to make your association more inclusive.

What good is diversity? When you have diverse representation on your associations' committees/leadership teams, it fosters growth through collaboration with members from different demographics. Diversity allows us to work in an environment which reflects the world we all live in.