

HOW WESTCHESTER
FIRMS PROMOTE DEI

ENSURING EQUAL ACCESS
TO HEALTHCARE

A CHAMBER OF
COMMERCE FOR ALL

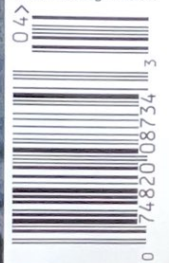
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Diversity
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Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Area businesses work to ensure
equal access to success

By Tom Schreck



Melissa Andrews, chief client relations officer and chair of the Diversity and Inclusion Council of Dorf & Beaman LLP in Rye, is at the forefront of her law firm's DEI effort.

PHOTO BY TOSHI TASAKI



"DEI is the commitment that people are at the heart of the organization – the recognition that respect and fairness are things everyone wants and deserves."

-MICHELLE NICHOLAS
PCSB Bank

Setting out to develop a DEI program in an organization takes more than printing letterhead, business cards, and getting new nameplates for the office. Organizations making an authentic investment are deploying resources, time, and focused attention to the subject.

"The organization didn't have anything formal in place besides a DEI Taskforce which led to various recommendations, including my position," notes Freddimir Garcia, DEI officer for the Hudson Gateway Association of Realtors (HGAR) in White Plains. "They didn't just post a job opening; instead, they hired a consultant to walk them through the process and conducted training for the board, staff, and taskforce members. Ultimately, the process led to establishing my role as DEI Officer."

Garcia was previously the special assistant to the President for diversity, inclusion, and community engagement at Marist College and the northern regional director for DEI at Westchester Medical Center Health Network (WMCHealth). For him, the job is a blending of his profession and what he values as an individual.

"In many ways, I don't think you can really separate the professional and the personal.



* Michelle Nicholas (below left), who oversees DEI efforts at PCSB Bank, believes that a community focus is essential. She was recently joined by PCSB Bank President and CEO Joseph Sabatini (right) in presenting the final installment of a \$60,000 grant to Girls Inc. and its executive director Shortlee Smith-Rodriguez (center).

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PCSB BANK



Freddimir Garcia, DEI officer for the Hudson Gateway Association of Realtors (HGAR)

PHOTO BY TOSHI TASAKI

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

We all bring our personal experiences into the work we do every day, so I don't think you can parcel it out," Garcia says. "But what I think you can do is be intentional in addressing both aspects at your organization. Celebrate the personal, acknowledge the professional and allow the process to grow over time."

The process is not simple, and any oversimplification of it can reinforce the sense of disingenuousness that inspired the creation of DEI programs in the first place.

HGAR invested resources of time, talent, and money to get the process started. But another important part of the effort is educating staff members and getting them to buy in. Some organizations develop new committees, while others take the pulse of the organization through surveys or work with the existing leadership to effect change.

"When we started, I told the firm's leadership that for this to work, you have to be open. That means listening and being receptive when criticism comes up," says Melissa Andrieux, chair of the Diversity and Inclusion Council at Dori & Nelson LLP, a law firm headquartered in Rye. "If management is open, honest, and really invested in the process working, it will be effective. If they are not invested, it definitely will not work."

Andrieux says that the values were in place at Dori & Nelson before any formal DEI process took place. Having a diverse workforce helps attract a diverse customer base and promotes trust — and trust at a law firm is good business.

"The firm runs very smoothly, and there has been a minimum of criticism, but the ones that were raised were quickly addressed. That is the important thing," Andrieux says. "In addition, the firm does not want a homogeneous workforce. In its hiring process, the firm has embraced that ideal."

In organizations where the process starts with a committee, there are different challenges. Merely rounding up a representative from each perceived marginalized group is at best shortsighted and at worst reeks of tokenism. Inclusion demands that there is varied representation of committee members, but the DEI process demands more than that.

"I think the first thing you need is people who are passionate, committed, and want to be engaged in the work," Garcia notes. "It doesn't really matter to me what you look like."

More important than checking every group



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—MELISSA ANDRIEUX

*Chair of the Diversity & Inclusion Council
at Dorf & Nelson LLP*

box is getting people to ask the right questions and listen to one another — which also means bringing in individuals who haven't typically been marginalized.

"The White male question is an important one. We must understand the experience of all members of the team and include them in the conversation to understand where they can play a role in the work in pursuit of equity and social justice," Garcia says. "It is important that everyone has a voice, so we can come to a place of true progress."

Garcia's emphasis on the intent of any DEI effort is at the heart of the process. Being clear on the goals leads to clearer processes. A lack of preparation or starting any DEI effort without a focused intent leads to mistakes and difficulty measuring outcomes. Sometimes, the mistakes arise from not understanding what diversity really means.

"I think men, especially White men, sometimes are or feel excluded from the DEI movement," Andrieux says. "The reality is that because sometimes we are so focused on the marginalized groups, we might forget the aspect of the middle-aged White male. I like to say my door is always open, and when I say that, I mean it is open

to everyone. So, if you're a man, you are White, or you're a woman, or you're of color, like me, my door is open."

Andrieux sees White men as potential allies and feels it is a big mistake not to bring every group to the table. "To advance this work and culture we need to have more White men in the conversation to support the important work of DEI," echoes Nicholas.

If DEI is truly inclusive, and *inclusive* means everyone, then those with differing abilities need to have a seat during the discussions. This includes people with disabilities, especially those with limited mental capacities, which at first may seem difficult in an intellectually demanding organization. But it shouldn't.

Many advocates recognize the need to improve opportunities for people with disabilities. People with mental illnesses also need to be considered. While mental illness is becoming less stigmatized in society, how it is handled in the workplace still needs to evolve.

There are also subtleties within DEI efforts that need special focus and awareness. Though DEI recognizes each group's differences, true inclusion and respect for diversity go deeper, and that can be a difficult

concept for people who are not part of a marginalized group to understand.

"A good example is race. The focus needs to truly be on diversity and not just race," offers Garcia. "We have to expand our world and really examine what diversity means. The struggles of Black men are far different than the struggles of Black women. Whether intentionally or not, we sometimes leave some folks out."

Training and development are essential components of DEI practices, but diversity officers also recognize that the education should be goal-oriented. The training effort should be more than rolling out a pre-packaged curriculum or purchasing attractive brochures and binders. DEI training requires a thoughtful process that goes beyond what you can pick up in a handout or video.

"At IBM, we have a culture of continuous learning and are intentional about co-creating an environment that meets the needs of today's workplace," says Pickens. "IBM offers numerous courses on why diversity is essential, ways to identify and combat bias and racism, fostering allyship, and how to advance and lead inclusive workplaces. Training is just one aspect of how we are transforming our company culture."

At Regeneron, the needs of different cultural groups were assessed, committees with representative diversity were formed, and the executives were onboard when the company strategized its DEI training and development.

"We support employee-led, cross-functional groups who connect around a common passion to build a culture of inclusion and collaborate to support underserved science and global communities in order to provide inclusive professional development and leadership opportunities," Pillai notes. "In 2021, we launched six new Employee Resource Groups, made up of diverse groups of our staff. These groups provide professional development opportunities with leadership roles and support from members of senior leadership, as well as their

executive sponsors. We provide other opportunities for colleagues to get involved, including participating in Empathy Circles to be an ally or discussions on important DEI topics during our Inclusion Café."

In the end, the effectiveness of any DEI effort has to be measured and quantified to be properly evaluated. Even though measuring acceptance and inclusion can be challenging, there are ways of checking in with individuals and within the culture as a whole.

"I believe that it is always a good idea to have some metrics in place. Before your program starts, it is vital to understand the baseline and where you are starting from," says Tamisha Chestnut, director of DEI at The Ursuline School in New Rochelle. Chestnut has enlisted business executives of color to come to the all-girls Catholic private school and speak to students about their experiences. After she was hired last year to fill her newly created position, it was clear that the school wanted her efforts to have a real impact, and it was important for her to understand what that meant. But DEI leaders recognize that organizations must possess a growth mindset and not look at the efforts as a static project with a defined beginning and end.

"This is not a one-and-done. I want to look at where we started and then measure where we are six months and a year later. It is definitely a process," adds Andrieux.

The key to evaluation is finding effective measurement tools. According to DEI pro-

fessionals, surveying staff members should be the starting block, helping organizations understand where the culture is and where it needs to go.

"The first thing I believe you have to do is take a survey," notes Chestnut. "I want to know at the outset just how comfortable people are with talking about diversity in an organization. I want to know what type of professional development people think is necessary, and I want to know how they feel about interactions within the organization."



"I want to know at the outset just how comfortable people are with talking about diversity in an organization."

-TAMISHA CHESTNUT
The Ursuline School

Getting a sense of the before and after and how people experience the organization as they encounter it is one of the key elements of such an evaluation. The assessment requires examining the dynamics of the culture and how those dynamics play out in real life and in real time.

Focus groups and committees can also be valuable, as discussion can stimulate thought and reveal some information that even the most thorough survey can miss. But organizations must have the right people in the group, and they must feel safe to get the most out of the group experience.



▲ Maria Dautruche, the Director of the Westchester Center for Racial Equity, addresses members of Nonprofit Westchester's Emerging Leaders Program this past September.

"Our Employee Affinity Groups were created by the Bank to listen to our employees and act," notes Nicholas. "These groups are led by employees and include interest groupings such as the Black/African American Connection, Women's Employee Group, Asian Connection, Latin/Hispanic Connection, Native and Indigenous Peoples Group, PRIDE, Veteran's, and Diverse Abilities group. We are as a Bank focused on people and relationships, and so we listen and act accordingly."

Garcia added that organizations must be flexible in conducting these information-gathering sessions. "We do small groups, large training groups, and I also do a lot of one-on-one conversations where I do my best to listen to people," he says. "There are many ways to get people to open up, and it is important to not have a one-size-fits-all mentality."

Ultimately, one of the simplest measurement tools is still demographics. What does the staff look like? Who's

been promoted? What is the client base? Organization leaders may sense that things are changing, but if a look at the data doesn't support that notion, it is time to re-evaluate.

It's important to realize that DEI efforts are not exclusive to the for-profit sector and private schools. Public schools and nonprofits have embraced the movement as well. In many ways, nonprofits have been engaged in DEI work for many years by both employing and serving people from traditionally marginalized backgrounds. Ultimately, there's a lot to be learned from the human-service agencies who specialize in working with all types of people.

"The Westchester Center for Racial Equity, which was launched last year by the YWCA White Plains and Central Westchester, helps serve as a DEI training hub that was established with funding from Westchester County," notes Jan Fisher, executive director of Nonprofit Westchester (NPW), a Briarcliff Manor-based nonprofit support organization. "They have the expertise to come into an organization and identify what the goals and objectives are, do an assessment, and provide an organization with the training necessary to make a real DEI impact." Maria Dautruche, the director of the Center and a native of Mount Vernon, briefed future nonprofit leaders at a meeting of the NPW's Emerging Leaders Program in September.

In the end, DEI is about human relationships, interactions, and respect. Outcomes can be measured; demographics can be checked; and surveys can tell you what people are thinking and feeling. DEI professionals have to be optimists who believe in people and believe they can bring them together.

There is still room for intuition and instinct, but for any DEI effort to be effective and real, the changes must go further than the adoption of a new philosophy. History has shown that ideas may be the start but that the act of doing is where real change lies.

"In order for us to effect change, we need to work from the inside out," Nicholas concludes. "We must look beyond our front door and change our community, one person at a time." ●

Tom Schreck is a frequent contributor to 914INC.