

ABORIGINAL AWARENESS

Your Workplace and Aboriginal Diversity

Aboriginals have been studying our various cultures for 500 years. If we want more of them in our workplaces, maybe we should return the compliment

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Editor's Note: The following is the eighth in our series of columns designed to improve awareness of Aboriginal issues. They stem from an APEGGA goal to increase Aboriginal representation in the engineering, geological and geophysical professions. Check The PEGG Online for earlier stories in the series.

Here are two questions I hear a lot. "Robert, can you teach us about Aboriginal culture?" And, "Do you teach cross-cultural awareness?"

Please take note of the singular use of the word culture. More on that later.

Aboriginal peoples have been studying the cultures of North America's newcomers for 500 years. They speak your language. They know your religion, political systems, laws and justice systems, education requirements, decision-making processes, business ethics and morality expectations. And they participate in a multitude of your ceremonies — Halloween, St. Patrick's Day, Christmas and Easter.

Consider what you know — better yet, what you don't know. Do you know how Aboriginal people celebrate the holy season? Have you ever had the good fortune of being invited to a sweat lodge ceremony? Have you ever been smudged? Visited a powwow?

Have you joined Aboriginals in celebrating International Aboriginal Awareness Day, their national holiday, celebrated every year on June 21?

If not, I suggest you're missing many opportunities to learn about others — and find out how much others have already learned about you.

I hear stereotypical comments, too. "Those Indians are always late for meetings." "Why hire these people when we know they will never stay? It seems they have no sense of loyalty. What's the matter with these people?"

By now the emphasis should be on non-Aboriginal people to learn more about Aboriginal people. There's no better way to dispel the myths and correct the misinformation that have led to negative stereotypes.

Changing a community's paradigm about some of its fellow citizens, however, can be a daunting task. If you haven't started, there's no time like the present, is there?

Which Culture Is That?

Government and private sector employers frequently ask me to explain cultural issues. My response goes like this: which culture would you like to learn about? Usually by now the employers look pretty puzzled, because they don't understand that within Aboriginal communities in Canada, there are literally hundreds of cultures.

There are 53 separate and distinct languages and well over 200 dialects. Think of the words Aboriginal or native in the same context as European or Asian. These are terms referring to a great number of very diverse and distinct cultures from a particular geographical region.

The opposite of assimilation is separation, and that is precisely what the Aboriginal people of Canada have endured for some 300 years.

Integration and even adaptation to the workplace environment are perfectly acceptable. However, with all the work being done by employers to diversify their workforce and take a visible stand against racial discrimination, there's a corollary question I have to ask.

Here it is: What are employers doing to prepare their workplaces for the arrival of Aboriginal employees?

I often hear, "Pull up your bootstraps, forget all the historical garbage, just get to work everyday, fit in, do what we do and all will be just fine in your life and mine." That is simply not the reality of the workplace today, and rightly so. Giving up who you are to become a part of something else is a medieval concept, and even newcomers to Canada won't accept that drivel.

Tapping into the Aboriginal labour market to attract qualified candidates is not the same as your typical mainstream search for staff. The training needed for recruiters and hiring managers is different, when it comes to interviewing Aboriginal candidates and judging their merit. Also critical is properly preparing the workplace to improve retention rates, should these candidates be deemed qualified.

In the Job Market

With 50,000 Aboriginal students in post-secondary classes and 4,000 of them graduating right now, what are employers doing to position themselves to be considered by these

highly qualified candidates? Between 1996 and 2006, the Aboriginal population grew by 45 per cent, and the Métis population increased a whopping 91 per cent in the last five years alone.

There are many potential workers within these numbers, and it's time you, your companies and our governments took notice.

While everything from major oil companies to tiny consultancies feel the sting of the labour shortage, Ottawa and the provinces are making it easier and faster to recruit staff from overseas. The reasoning is that there are no qualified Canadians for hire here.

Alberta employers requested 94,123 labourers from other countries between April 1, 2007, and March 31, 2008. Last year we had more than 10,000 temporary foreign workers enter Alberta. In 2006 we had a base population of 22,000 temporary workers in the province.

The temporary foreign worker program is very different from "traditional" immigration programs. These workers are here only on a short-term program and only if employers "can't find" Canadians to do the work.

An obvious place to look for workers, however, is being ignored. It is the pool of 156,200 Aboriginal Albertans, whose unemployment rate is three times that of the non-Aboriginal population. Not a bus driver or a heavy-duty mechanic among them, eh?

Admissions of Ignorance

It's hardly surprising that many Albertans are ignorant of this potential.

In recent surveys, 76 per cent of Canadians acknowledge they know very little about Aboriginal people, their history and how these people came to be where they are in our society. Another five per cent indicate they know absolutely nothing about Aboriginal people.

How does a team leader, manager or co-worker initiate a simple business or social conversation with an Aboriginal person without feeling high levels of apprehension? If you know nothing about an Aboriginal's culture, you'll fear offending the person unintentionally, won't you? It's only natural.

When you shy away from initiating a conversation with someone, you contribute to that person's feeling of exclusion. This can and does happen to Aboriginals and to anyone else from a new or different culture.

The exit door can't be far behind for those experiencing this kind of isolation.

Take me, for example. Say I came to work for you. My photo is at the top of this page, but perhaps you know little else about me.

I am an Aboriginal person but not an Indian, so what am I?

There are 1.4 million Aboriginal people in Canada and only about 50 per cent are so-called “Indians.” Which category of Indian (and there are three) is commonly referred to as First Nations?

If 100 per cent of all treaty Indians are status, why is it that only 50 per cent of status Indians are treaty?

These are not trick questions. You might want to figure out the answers, particularly if you’re a recruiter.

Recruiters are the windows to their whole organizations. One recruiter that appears uninformed is going to generate concern in any Aboriginal candidate about what to expect in the workplace.

What’s Fair?

Equity is another word for fairness. Equality is another word for sameness. Can we really be fair if we treat everyone the same?

With so many cultures represented in today’s workplace, what are employers doing to teach all these very different people what their organizations’ cultures are? Employers are doing some extraordinary things to ensure that employees feel they are part of the team, that there exists a climate of mutual respect, that creativity and cohesiveness are encouraged and supported throughout the organization.

These efforts are based on a philosophy of inclusion for everyone. For a recruiter or hiring manager to ask an Aboriginal person where they are from is considered a very high compliment and a most welcome question — especially if the recruiter actually knows where the place is. Being comfortable, confident and knowledgeable with the most basic terminology leads to successful interview outcomes.

In the meantime, the public campaign to support the use of temporary workers to ease the labour shortage continues. The City of Calgary, for example, is in desperate need of bus drivers, city planners and heavy-duty mechanics.

Labour demand is projected to continuously grow for the next five years. By 2011 (in three years) new Canadians are predicted to account for all of the growth in our workforce.

Technical skills are much easier to teach than soft skills. When candidates have organizational skills, verbal communication skills, problem-solving skills, tact and diplomacy skills and teamwork skills, they’re highly desirable as employees.

Nationally over the past 10 years there's been a 17 per cent decrease — that's right, a decrease — in corporate spending on training, learning and development programs. Yet we continue to hear from these same companies about a skilled workforce shortage.

Trying to compete on wages alone is futile and only about 56 per cent of corporations actually consider themselves a “learning organization.” At the same time, professional associations — yours included — are increasingly calling on continuing education and professional development as requirements.

Most employers today know how important workforce planning has become and that proper training tools need to be identified and prioritized. Tapping into the Aboriginal workforce requires key people with very specific skills who understand the organization's business case about why Aboriginal people must be included.

All this is based on fully qualified Aboriginal candidates being interested in working for your organization. The better the training available, the more attractive your organization becomes.

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