

A New and Different Thanksgiving

By Levon Johnson
Chamber President/CEO

This is the seventh of ten consecutive articles that I will be writing covering the most frequent topics I have discussed in the first half of 2019.

I was talking to a friend about Thanksgiving the other day. I know it is two months away. She was saying that this year her family is planning on inviting non-family members over for Thanksgiving Dinner.

The thought behind this is to share with others the abundance of food they usually have. She realizes by adding people she'll end up making more food which will probably lead to more leftovers to share.

She also was looking forward to the new topics of conversation that would come from having people not traditionally at her family's gathering. This would allow for more stories and possibly create new traditions that they all can share and take back for future gatherings.

Admittedly, she said she is a decent cook but not very imaginative. She had decided in an effort to make her "new family members" feel at home she would get their input into the menu. By making this simple gesture she would create a sense of shared involvement and respect for the differences in food choices which we all know is a big part of culture.

I share this story to illustrate one of the continuous conversations that has been had in recent meetings I've attended. The topic of Diversity and Inclusion has been and continues to be on the minds of a lot of people. Questions usually arise around why is it important, how will it positively impact my business/organization, and is it a separate issue or should it be embedded in everything we do?

There has been plenty of research that is available on the subject of Diversity and Inclusion and I encourage your team to follow up and understand the benefits and why it is important.

Much like the story I shared at the beginning there are some things that are key to developing a good Diversity and Inclusion strategy that benefits everyone involved.

First, be committed. Your strategy will only be beneficial if the commitment is more than words and the commitment permeates the entirety of your organizational chart. Like my friend above, decide you are going to do something different and then prepare a plan of execution to make sure you get the Thanksgiving Day outcomes you are aiming for.

Second, be intentional. D&I usually doesn't just happen and if it does it is usually not sustainable in that way. You will have to be intentional in the way you develop, execute, and evaluate your plan. You will need to be intentional about how you recruit team members to begin the diversification of your organization. In other words, who are you going to invite to Thanksgiving Dinner?

Third, make sure your new team members feel they are a valued part of the team. This is the inclusion part. D&I is not a quota system. For D&I to work it has to have mutual benefits. The employer has to gain from the employee and the employee has to have the opportunity to grow professionally. My friend's Thanksgiving Day plan won't be as effective if her invited guests arrive and are relegated to the "kiddy table" and don't share in the larger conversations of the "big people table".

Lastly, empowerment is key. Once invited, arrived, and at the table, being able to give input and help lead the implementation of ideas is important to getting the full impact of D&I and strengthening the likelihood of retaining valuable team members. This is where I explained to my friend that maybe the Thanksgiving gathering would be better served if she not only got input on the menu but also encouraged her guests to make

and share some of their favorite Thanksgiving meal items.

Commitment. Intentionality. Inclusivity. Empowerment.

If you haven't already done so, I would encourage you to take some time to think about how diversifying your organization would enhance your work place and your bottom line. I would also remind you that Diversity and Inclusion is not just a race issue.

Some questions for you to do some organizational self-reflection:

- What unique differences of thought and experiences do members of your team bring to your processes of success?
- Does your organization purposefully search out individuals who may be different than the majority?
- How do you make sure that people who look different, have different life experiences, and different perspectives are heard and appreciated for what they have to say and offer?

Have a positive and productive week.