

## Leveraging Employee Diversity

This article was published in the July-August 2001 issue of Que Pasa Hispanic Magazine LEVERAGING EMPLOYEE DIVERSITY TO BECOME MARKET LEADERS by Lupe I. Torre As the media releases census figures, we are learning that Central Florida's diversity almost mirrors the rest of the U.S. The Orlando Sentinel reports that: 65.4% of our residents are Anglos, 16.8% Latinos/as, 14.6% African-Americans, 1.6% Asian-Americans, and 2% chose the "other" category. Our multi-cultural population gives us the opportunity to select a diverse workforce that will give our companies a strategic market advantage.

A workforce that mirrors the rest of the country allows us to serve a diverse customer base. Prospects are attracted to companies that understand their needs and values, and can easily relate to them. Consumers (and our most talented employees) are also attracted to companies that employ and promote people "who look like them," and who support their communities and organizations. In Florida we can further leverage our diversity by becoming import/export leaders and the gateway to Latin America: We already have the multicultural workforce to assist us in accomplishing this goal! Attracting a multicultural workforce of "superstars" requires the ability to spot "diamonds in the rough." We then "develop" them by setting up a corporate culture that values their uniqueness and builds on their strengths, regardless of gender, ethnic, racial or religious differences. By building a career path, emphasizing life-long learning, and offering support systems like mentoring and coaching programs, we encourage all our talented employees to be the best they can be. Instead of top down, the best way to create a culture of inclusiveness is to tap into employees' creativity when developing career path initiatives. Research has shown that the most creative work teams are those with the most diversity. It might take longer to develop these initiatives; however, the results will be worthwhile, and what is learned can be applied to the rest of the organization. If our diverse workforce is representative of our customer base, then it makes sense to involve our employees as co-creators of a corporate culture that respects and values diversity. So, how do we begin this process? First, there needs to be a commitment to diversity from top management. This is then communicated to the rest of the management team and employees by words and actions. The company's mission and vision statements; corporate values; policies and procedures; hiring, promotion, vendor and philanthropic practices, all have to contribute to the creation of this multicultural tapestry that values differences and builds on strengths. Although not a fast or easy step, it provides a solid foundation for creating an inclusive environment. In order for a program of this magnitude to succeed, we must provide on-going support systems and learning opportunities for the management team. In our fast-paced and ever-changing work environment, the growth of our companies depends on providing a lifelong learning environment that allows managers to constantly update and upgrade their skills. To support them in their personal and professional growth and to assist them in successfully maneuvering their own careers, support systems such as coaching and mentoring ensure the success of other initiatives. An organization that provides these learning opportunities has a built-in system that can easily be expanded to include employees with management potential. Developing a multicultural management team that mirrors our customer base then becomes part of the corporate culture. If we examine recent research studies, we can see that managers are the most important variable in employee retention. As managers learn to balance their administrative and people functions, they are better able to coach employees to become more productive and satisfied with their jobs. A survey conducted by William M. Mercer, Inc., found that where turnover rates were low, monetary rewards appeared to be less an underlying factor than intrinsic rewards: 40% of respondents stated that emotional factors, such as work satisfaction and good relationships with their managers and other employees, completely contributed to low turnover rates. Only 21% believed that compensation and employer-provided benefits were solely responsible for employee retention. When we take into account that replacement costs are estimated to be between 40% and 250% of an employee's annual salary, it makes good business sense to provide managers with all the tools necessary to become "managers of choice." By now you may be asking: "What does all this have to do with Central Florida?" My personal opinion is that Central Florida businesses have the unique opportunity to develop programs that capitalize on our multicultural workforce and project our companies to market leadership positions, both within the domestic and international markets (remember, we mirror the diversity in the rest of the U.S.). We already have a history of local organizations taking leadership positions in other areas of workforce development, with successful pilot programs that are being replicated in other parts of the country. We can do the same thing with one of our greatest natural resources: Our ever-growing multicultural population. However, to accomplish this we must first make a commitment to inclusion, respecting differences, building on strengths, and providing lifelong learning opportunities and support systems that will assist our employees in becoming the best they can be. What a colorful, creative, productive and collaborative showcase we can build together in Central Florida! Copyright (C) 2001, Lupe I. Torre. All Rights Reserved.