

Public POWER

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Human Resources

Growing our Own

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I remember my first presentation in 1995 to the nearly 200 members of our water and electric field crews at Riverside Public Utilities in Southern California. The lack of color in the faces of our work force was glaring; there were only a handful of Latin-, Asian-, and African-Americans. It immediately struck me, a white male, that our work force did not represent the community we serve. Furthermore, the work force was 100 percent male, not a female in sight.

I was chief financial officer for RPU at that time, and had little influence over hiring practices for utility field positions. The areas I supervised then had more turnover, which gave me an opportunity to promote diversity within my section of the organization. Now, as general manager of RPU, I have a greater opportunity to build a more diverse work force. With more than 30 percent of our work force eligible for retirement in less than five years, I also have a chance to develop entry level candidates as we move more seasoned individuals up through the ranks.

One of the main challenges for managers and supervisors in our industry is also one of the strengths of our work force: employees often spend most of their entire careers in one organization. Many of Riverside's field forces have been with the utility for a decade or more. It is more difficult to change work force diversity and develop succession planning programs when hiring and promotion opportunities occur infrequently. As positions have become vacant, the marketplace in Southern California is so competitive that it is hard to find qualified candidates. We have determined that we must develop our own candidate pool, as we can no longer rely solely on the marketplace to provide a good pool of candidates. The only real solution is to "grow our own."

To start with, we must ensure that adequately trained candidates are available within our local community. And we need to start with high school-aged students, working with them through field and office internships, to ensure that we continue to have a work force to meet the service needs of our customers.

We are doing a few things at Riverside Public Utilities to improve diversity and develop a new crop of recruits. The programs have just started and we don't yet know the results. But we have to start somewhere, and so far we have had good community feedback.

T3 Program—T3 stands for Trades Technical Training program. Working with our two local school districts, we identified the high schools with the greatest minority populations. We picked one high school in each district. Next we created material aimed at intelligent high school seniors who might be interested in technical/field careers. There are many bright students with strong technical aptitude who wish to work in trade type careers, rather than go to college. They just don't know how to go about getting into these technical fields.

Students interested in the T3 Program fill out an application during fall and winter, and we review the applications in spring. Four students are chosen from each high school each year. While race is not considered a factor for employment, the populations of these schools will assist in enabling RPU's work force to reflect our overall community.

The students are then hired 30 hours a week for two years to gain experience in trades and crafts type careers in the water and electric fields. The students must commit to taking one class a semester on their own time and obtain a passing grade. The T3 Program can have 16 students at any given time, although it may have fewer. The students are advised that they may be released at any point if they do not perform satisfactorily. However, each student is assigned a mentor to help him or her navigate the program.

At the end of each year, up to eight qualified entry-level candidates are ready for us to hire. Will we hire each graduate? Probably not, as there may not be enough vacant positions each year. However, other city departments may have a need for these candidates, which helps our organization as a whole. And, we have provided a community service in training young adults for rewarding careers.

College internships—This effort has been more challenging, as the closest university with an established engineering program is 40 miles away. This may not sound far to those in rural areas, but in the greater Southern California area, where you are fighting for qualified candidates, 40 miles represents a 90-minute commute in rush-hour traffic. Add to this an inland location in a beach-oriented state, and it provides a challenge to attracting college students to our internship programs.

Staff targeted several professors in the engineering majors at this college and developed good relationships. Working with those professors, a number of students are identified and invited to visit our offices and interact with staff. Some of these students are later contacted to see if they are interested in internships.

It is important for the college students to see staff members at work who are just a few years older than they are. It is not really important that a college student see the tasks and duties of a 40-year-old employee who worked for the utility for 15 years. Interns can relate much better to younger, newer employees. When possible, we try to find students who graduated from local high schools, as they are the most likely ones to take these local internships. And, they are most likely to return to where they grew up. As many utilities have found, there tends to be a great level of diversity in engineering students, making a well rounded pool of potential interns less of a challenge.

Good interns are pursued for annual summer internships, and developed for entry level engineering candidates. We try to get interns after their second year of college and have them come back for a second summer internships when we can. Internship programs carry a risk of losing the intern to another utility, but at least the student has developed a working relationship with staff and been exposed to projects that may encourage them to stick with us. And, we're better off than doing nothing.

Breaking the gender gap—We have a bigger challenge in developing female candidates for this traditionally male-dominated industry. It is hard to find women who can meet the strength requirements for field careers. Even when they can, these jobs are often not attractive to women. The T3 and College Internship Program assist in getting career information out in front of potential candidates. We have recruited several female engineering interns, but are still working on ways to attract women into our field careers. We are studying recruitment programs used by our police and fire departments as a possible model for the utility.

Recruiting partners—One must never forget the best partners when recruiting younger, local candidates: their parents! If we can encourage candidates with potential local jobs, parents can use their influence to encourage their children to stay in their hometown with the prospect of a promising and rewarding career at the local utility. I have made presentations at various community meetings, encouraging parents to consider utility jobs when discussing career paths with their children. While we do not have direct interaction with the parents of staff in our training and internship programs, we know that they are at home rooting their kids to success.

Why this is so important to me—Why is this so important to a middle-aged, white general manager, who appears to fit the demographic management stereotype we are all used to? While I am a white male, I am a gay white male, with an African-American partner, in an industry not known for gay members in the top ranks. (By the way, I have never experienced a derogatory comment to me in the nearly two decades I have been with the city and its utility.) Maybe this makes me more aware of diversity in the work force. It might also be a reason that I am focused on creating an environment where diversity is welcomed and seen as the strength it is.

Diversity in the workplace makes the organization stronger and the community it serves a better place. Just like it takes a variety of skills to develop and build a successful project, it takes a variety of people to develop and build a great organization. s

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