



Coast Guard Flag Voice 37

DIVERSITY SUMMIT

As discussed in a previous Flag Voice, we recently held the Coast Guard's first Diversity Summit at the Coast Guard Academy 15-17 April. Almost 350 Coast Guard people attended, representing every conceivable aspect of Team Coast Guard and geographic area. At the same time, the Diversity Advisory Council, Leadership Council, and Command Master Chiefs met and participated. Master Chief Patton gave the final address. Coast Guard Flags, SES attendees, and participants included the Superintendent, RADM Teeson, ADM Loy, VADM Card, Mr. Walt Somerville, RADM Brown, RADM Olsen, RADM Stillman, and me. From the Department of Transportation came Mr. Jerry Malone, Chief of Staff, and Mr. Maurice Banks, Diversity Advocate. Outside speakers included Dr. Herb Wong, diversity trainer and consultant who helped us with the Workforce Cultural Audit, and Ms. CeCe Gordon from Xerox Co., a diversity management best practices corporation.

The goal going in was quite simple - generate frank, open discussion of the diversity management issues the Coast Guard faces, focusing on "best practices" and enabling participants to carry on dialog on returning to their units. My idea for the summit grew from my earlier work on diversity issues, such as gender discrimination and sexual harassment. I learned from sitting in working sessions with diverse study teams when participants expressed their views candidly and others responded face to face and challenged beliefs and preferences, then and then only did true understanding and learning take place. Standard training provides basic knowledge. Only by being made to feel "uncomfortable" will we seek to reevaluate our perceptions.

Mr. Maurice Banks eloquently set the stage for the Summit as keynote speaker. He laid out the clear business case for diversity management as the only way an organization will be the most effective, efficient, and competitive - an absolute must in today's resource-constrained environment. It's really about organizational survival. He charged us with challenging our core beliefs, our way of thinking, personal preferences, and our underlying cultural requirements. We need to be absolutely clear about requirements: all requirements we place on our people must be validated by their contributions to our missions - if the requirement doesn't help us perform our mission better, then it should be eliminated. We need to make sure we truly understand the cost of not managing diversity, such as turnover, retraining, poor morale, decreased productivity, lawsuits, complaints. Be honest in our dialog -- desire to understand differences, not just accepting them but rather valuing them. By so doing, we will be able to bring out the very best in everyone. Organizational culture must foster every individual's success - each of us must personally obligate ourselves to guiding, supporting, and training all to be successful. Diversity management is not a program, but a process of improving our culture - if it isn't perfect, then improve it! The bottom line - what causes us to be successful today has nothing to do with being successful tomorrow.

The Summit was an unqualified success. Through 15 panels, exceptional dialog surfaced about a multitude of critical issues. Leaders, human resources policy makers and process owners, and all Coast Guard members exchanged candid views, often challenging each other's beliefs. Speakers thoughtfully articulated their position. Many life experiences were shared, including those most disturbing, in which Coast Guard members were not made to feel valued. The result was often severe morale problems, mission degradation, and the ultimate loss of these individuals to the Service. I believe the participants learned more from these examples than any other conversations - I did. I expect every participant felt uncomfortable at least once and found themselves questioning their own perceptions. We all focused on the issues, rather than each other as individuals, in a non-threatening, non-attributive atmosphere. Specific comments remain back at the Summit.

We will publish a synopsis of the panel discussions. However, you really had to be there to feel the energy and truly understand the highly emotional issues discussed. You couldn't help but get charged up and leave ready to make the Coast Guard a better place for all. The very "best" policies and processes we in the Human Resources Program in Washington develop and deploy will make little progress in diversity management unless each of us strives to create the proper environment at our own unit.

What are our next steps? As the Summit closed, I reminded all of Ms. CeCe Gordon's charge to us: "What three things am I going to do?" People are leaving the Coast Guard because they are not valued and do not see career opportunities. How do we create the environment to be successful? Certainly, those of us in Washington will take the issues presented and work to improve our policies and practices. We will review our Diversity Management Strategic Plan with the Diversity Summit as guidance. As a follow-on to one of the sessions, I will charter a working group to specifically focus on minority women officer recruiting and retention issues. I encourage all Coast Guard members to sit down with those who participated and learn more about what went on during those important three days. Hold discussions at your units and perhaps diversity mini-summits in your geographic areas. Ensure diversity management discussions of best practices find their way onto CO and O-in-C conference agendas. Our Diversity Policy Advisors are available to assist. Work diversity management action items into your business plans (First District's Plan is an excellent example).

I want to personally thank the hundreds of supervisors throughout the Coast Guard who made it possible for their people to attend the Summit. I sincerely appreciate your continued support of diversity management - this is the single most important human resources issue for the future of our Service. We must get this right. Diversity management is about making the Coast Guard a better place for all!

I'll close with Mr. Banks' story, which best illustrates what we must do. He related his efforts to obtain a fish aquarium for his children. He went out and purchased top-of-the-line equipment - tank, gravel, plants, filter, food, etc. - along with expensive exotic fish. He had a wonderful aquarium - the best around. The next morning, however, he found all the fish floating dead on the surface. What he didn't realize was the water (the essential environment required for living) must be treated, to have its pH adjusted for the fish to survive. Once he did that, the aquarium flourished. This analogy applies to our Service. We have the very best people and some of the very best things - equipment, boats, aircraft,

facilities, and cutters. However, we too must have the proper nurturing environment to flourish.

Regards, FL Ames

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