Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion
Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion

Success stories

City of Saskatoon

A Canadian case study in diversity and inclusion

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Thanks to Jodi Fick-Dryka at the City of Saskatoon for talking to us for this case study.

Diversity training as a catalyst for change

Addressing issues of employment equity and diversity that were identified in focus groups with supervisors and managers, the City of Saskatoon has developed a highly effective diversity training program that has gone from research to being integrated into the training calendar for City employees in three years. We interviewed Jodi Fick-Dryka, Diversity Coordinator for the City of Saskatoon, who has been responsible for guiding this solution which has become an enabler of change for team members across the City's departments to better engage with each other, with customers – and along the way, improving how the City works.

The initiative started in 2012, with focus groups led by a third-party facilitator to identify diversity gaps among employees. From the findings, programming was piloted in workshops the following year and, from the positive outcomes, rolled out more widely in 2014. The City leveraged the expertise of local organizations to contextualize training and address their specific needs for inclusion. Employee engagement was enhanced by the positive effects of the training and supported through the City's leadership and operations, to be quickly adopted across departments and job functions.

This case study comes from what we learned, talking with Jodi Fick-Dryka about how the City of Saskatoon developed their training program, the transformation that it brought and the tactics that contributed to its success.

Balancing interests

While the diversity courses were developed to solve existing workplace issues, it was important for supervisors and employees to be able to incorporate the learning into the policies, collective agreements and procedures that were already in place – the City being subject to the obligations and expectations of Employment Equity legislation and unions.

That balance of looking to solve workplace issues on one hand, with the range of rules and regulations governing how employees perform their jobs on the other hand, might be what made contextualized training such an effective solution for the City. Context shaped the content for diversity training so it was customized to teams' needs, useful for the experiences employees encountered, with solutions that accommodated the framework of rules and process.

The course calendar that launched in 2014 for the City's employees has grown to include Cultural Competence, Intercultural Awareness, Religious Accommodation, Cultural Bridging, Disability Awareness, Aboriginal Awareness and American Sign Language. Employees sign up for courses online, finding out about them from supervisors or through internal communications.

Building contextualized training

One example of bringing context to the diversity training was with Cultural Bridging, which was customized to meet the needs of different work units. Jodi was emphatic that one size doesn't fit all when it comes to diversity training so modules are designed to fit employees' learning style or work style and the needs of the group, and for each specific issue. She described two examples where Cultural Bridging was implemented differently.

Employees in the Assessment Branch, for instance, who visited Saskatoon properties to evaluate taxes were required by the City's safety policy and procedures to wear steel-toed boots. Yet some religious institutions they visited required that footwear be left at the door. Employees were stuck between the obligation of their job and the desire to be respectful, and felt uncertain how best to manage the situation. **Saskatoon Open Doors Society** was brought in for cultural bridging so that employees could better understand what was expected of them as guests in different religious buildings. A newfound grasp of the issues helped the team problem-solve and land on a mutually agreeable solution to wear disposable boot covers.

The result was that employees could do their jobs more easily and feel they were culturally aware, while still adhering to the rules and regulations in place for their jobs. Customer service improved, conflict was reduced and relations with local religious leaders benefited from the increased understanding of city employees.

The City's Cultural Awareness training was customized to a very different workplace agenda when a knowledge gap was identified in one of their employee programs for peer support, the Employee Family Assistance Program (EFAP). EFAP relies on volunteer peer advisors to guide employees looking for support on personal, non-work issues through a confidential referral system to outside counselling services that are covered by the City. To help advisors navigate the cultural sensitivities that can play into family and interpersonal values, preferences and decisions, trainers explained cultural norms so advisors could more appropriately direct their fellow employees to available services.

Contextualizing disability awareness

With each new program developed, the City aims to work with trainers to develop scenarios relevant to the lives and work of participants that enhance an understanding of diversity and inclusion for different cultures, abilities and other aspects of identity. So the City also made their training for disability awareness context-specific.

A manager brought forward a challenge he had identified in his team, noting a lack of inclusion for some people with disabilities – they were essentially sidelined, affecting their ability to participate.

The City invited another third-party service agency to present a disability awareness workshop. The __Saskatchewan Abilities Council__, specializing in employment for people with disabilities, presented a workshop with scenarios that were specific to the team's employees and issues, with an outcome that was so effective that the manager made the module mandatory for his team, a win for the City's diversity training.

Both the cultural awareness and disability awareness training programs demonstrate how the City has used contextual customization to make diversity training relevant and easy to apply for employees, supervisors and team leads. And with learning outcomes measured by surveying what employees knew about a topic both pre- and post-training, Jodi and her team can continuously be adapting the program in a responsive way.

Cultivating cross-functional engagement

The City brought American Sign Language (ASL) into the training calendar to increase engagement with the City's employees who are deaf and hard of hearing – and came out with an unexpected bonus to employee engagement. Not only was increased inclusion reported for hard of hearing and deaf employees as participants communicated more easily with each other; new bridges were built across the employee base, extending to management roles.

Due to the wide cross-functional participation the course attracted, it emerged that a course appealing to a wide range of people across departments and job functions could bring people together through shared interests. An enhanced appreciation developed among participants over the 10-week course for those in different parts of the organization. New relationships developed across what had been perceived as organizational divides, lasting beyond the course.

In the feedback that was tracked in surveys from employees and supervisors about each of the diversity courses, there were reports of better team performance and improved participation for persons with disabilities as they were more included – and participants and supervisors could point to examples of improved service. The impact of the surveys for the diversity team translates to an understanding that is helping them plan ahead more accurately.

Helping that engagement spread

At the start of the initiative, all of the diversity courses and workshops were found in their own 'diversity' category in the City's training schedule. Now they are integrated into the pre-existing categories of the course calendar, so the focus on skills and outcomes fit with the goals that are guiding the organization. It's an inherently inclusive approach to diversity training. As such, when employees find the course Conversations for Aboriginal Inclusion with other training in the Effective Communication course category, they see an aspect of diversity that is included in the City's support for effective communication, rather than put in a bucket of 'other.' By including it with pre-existing training categories, the City has positioned Aboriginal Inclusion as a normal – not exceptional – offering for employees improving their communication skills.

Moving employee engagement up through supervisors and managers, the City is looking ahead to include diversity and inclusion goals in performance reviews to increase support for the diversity training. They plan to build diversity and inclusion targets into operational goals by connecting them with the managers' goals, which will enhance their ability to track the effects of the training.

The City of Saskatoon is also promoting engagement through teams with Inclusive Workplace Champion Recognition, their internal awards celebrating leadership, which has moved engagement with diversity forward. The annual awards have become a storytelling platform for diversity programs, as leaders share their experiences and best practices, cultivating the kind of authentic conversations about diversity issues within their work and social groups that change attitudes and behaviours.

Tactics that make a difference

The City of Saskatoon made a decision to invest in diversity training to address the issues in their workplaces and bring about change. Moving from the focus groups in 2012, to pilot workshops in 2013 and the first full year of programming in 2014, the City has seen change happen quickly. The following three tactics that helped create transformation for the City's workforce are applicable across many different kinds of organizations, work cultures and job functions.

Tap into outside expertise

By bringing in third-party organizations for diversity training that was responsive to the issues identified in the focus groups, the City leveraged the existing knowledge of subject experts in the wider community. The diversity team was able to deliver appropriate training by supplementing in-house resources with external expertise. For employees, the immediate benefit of learning from third-party partners for the courses and workshops was the specialized knowledge and local perspectives on issues from outside organizations.

The City saw the effectiveness of courses validated by a subsequent demand for more. Due to the fast and positive results from training sessions, supervisors started coming forward with more requests to manage specific issues within their units.

Adapt to be context-specific

In each instance where the City's diversity training made a difference, the training content was directly relevant to participants' needs and the team's objectives. Training modules were customized to address specific situations employees were facing.

Context didn't only relate to content, it related to format. Not all employees were suited for classroom learning, especially those who spend little or no time in an office environment, or work night shifts; so formats were customized to fit the needs of employees. By adapting the training to how teams worked, participation increased.

The finding was that approaching diversity training with a high degree of customization made it meaningful for employees and valuable for supervisors. Success was demonstrated in the high rate

of participation from employees and their ability to apply what was learned into their work quickly.

Integrate diversity training into existing programming

The City of Saskatoon moved diversity training out of its own category in the training calendar, integrating it into the four existing categories where employees would find the rest of the courses and workshops: Effective Communication, Openness and Accountability, Reliable and Responsive Service, and Strong Management and Fiscal Responsibility – categories that correspond to the City's core values.

Integrating the courses and workshops into the categories shaped from the City's core values has made diversity programming more inclusive. It meant that when employees came across the course Conversations for Aboriginal Inclusion along with other courses in Effective Communication, the expected outcome could be improved employee communications. Integrating the diversity programming into the existing training categories normalized diversity courses and workshops.

An adaptive solution

With nearly 4,000 employees with different needs and a wide range of job functions, the City has found that their diversity champions are continuously improving employee engagement with diversity by bringing the conversation around the issues out of training modules and into the workplace. As Canadian municipalities manage planning for diverse workplaces – and a diverse demographic – there is valuable learning from this city's quick and responsive approach.

The Success story initiative

There is astonishingly little published that shines a light on diversity and inclusion successes in Canada, though there are many, across a wide range of organizations. Case studies referenced by trainers and leadership tend to be reporting on different countries, cultures, political and economic settings.

The goal of this initiative is to support diversity and inclusion leadership with stories that are relevant to what's happening now, here in Canada. By sharing their stories, we celebrate the successes of Canadian organizations while contributing to learning for everyone that cares about diversity and inclusion.

The employers who have developed initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion as priorities in the workplace are responding to an increasingly competitive economy that's responsive to the diversity of employees – and the country. We are grateful to those who have participated in interviews.

This series of case studies will be published monthly through 2016. Subscribing to our monthly newsletter at ccdi.ca will keep you updated with the latest case studies, which will all be posted online at ccdi.ca/successstories. For more information, contact communications@ccdi.ca.

The Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion

The CCDI has a mission to help the organizations we work with be inclusive, free of prejudice and discrimination – and to generate the awareness, dialogue and action for people to recognize diversity as an asset and not an obstacle. Through the research, reports and toolkits we develop and our workshops, events and workplace consultations, we're helping Canadian employers understand their diversity, plan for it and create inclusion.

CCDI's leadership has a proven model that's cultivated trust as an impartial third party. Our expertise is focused on the topics of inclusion that are relevant in Canada now and the regional differences that shape diversity.

A charitable organization that thinks like a business, we have created a niche with our innovative research technology and data analysis that brings a deeper understanding of Canadian diversity demographics and mindsets at any given moment.

CCDI is grateful for the support of Employer Partners across Canada. For enquiries, contact Susan Rogers, Chief Client Officer, Susan.Rogers@ccdi.ca or (416) 968-6520.

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