

## **The Diversity Journey** **by Tasnim McCormick Benhalim**

Like dinosaurs, homogeneous workplaces have become relics of the past. Diversity has become a reality of the world around us. Today, companies with an eye on the future are seeking ways to harness this reality to contribute to their competitive advantage. Organizations such as Johnson & Johnson, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Texas Instruments, AT&T and Avon Products, recognize a clear link between their corporate diversity initiatives and prosperity. A recent survey by SHRM/Fortune found that 91 percent of respondents said that diversity initiatives assisted their organizations in maintaining a competitive advantage.

The Dallas HR Diversity Committee "is committed to developing diversity initiatives within the Dallas HR organization that foster an environment of inclusion, where diversity is integrated and celebrated in every aspect of the organization." As part of that ongoing mission, the committee is creating a series of articles focused on diversity. This first article will provide a historical overview and ask: What is diversity? How has the concept of diversity evolved over time?

Early diversity efforts tended to focus on race and gender with an underlying philosophy that generally focused on accommodation by the majority to allow a "place at the table" to designated minorities. In those early days, diversity programs sought to redress past wrongs through Affirmative Action programs with measured, legal accountability. Diversity training focused on changing beliefs to remove discrimination in the workplace and establish an equitable, balanced workplace based on meritocracy. This approach, though well-meaning, often polarized and caused alienation in the workplace as it left participants with a strong sense of unmet expectations. In short, the early promise of diversity was often unrealized and even at times, counter-productive.

By the early 1990s, for many companies, the concept of diversity had evolved to include not only EEO compliance but also a more inclusive, humanitarian approach focused on "doing the right thing". Broad expressions of good intent were interwoven into corporate mission statements and values. These well-meaning diversity initiatives had little or no accountability through on-going evaluation and measurement and were rarely tied to strategic initiatives and succession planning. Companies that have failed to move beyond this approach have sometimes found themselves open to litigation for not "walking" their "talk" (See Dallas Morning News Article: 08/21/2001: "Firms failing to add diversity as pledged may land in court: Companies cautioned against initiatives they can't back up" by Patricia Rivera).

Where has diversity evolved today? Perceptions of diversity now include not only race and gender but also differences in religion, age, sexual orientation, education, culture, work title/status, family relationships, geographical location and personal style. In short, diversity has evolved to a simple, but profound premise: "All the ways in which we are different." This larger picture of diversity includes everyone and matters to everyone. It also serves to draw lines of relationship between people who may be outwardly different but share common values, skills, styles or backgrounds - a ready reminder of our common humanity.