Advocate, Validate, & Respond

By: Sylvia Lee, MA-C, LPC

Creating an inclusive work environment should be the goal for every organization. An **inclusive workplace** is one that values individual differences, has a diverse population of employees, and makes all employees feel supported regardless of their background or circumstances.

The lack of **diversity** in organizations is not simply a hiring issue. Focusing on hiring more people of color and diverse backgrounds not only treats people as token minorities, it also makes those of the majority population feel as if they are not having equal access to employment opportunities either. Increased numbers will not fix the culture and environment that excluded people of minority cultures in the first place and it certainly will not eliminate cultural biases and stereotypes that make work environments feel discriminatory.

Instead, the real focus should be for leaders to create a culture that values, rewards, and supports individual differences as well as one that responds immediately to any allegation of discriminatory behavior. Work environments where all employees are held to the same standards and have leaders that advocate, validate and respond is a work culture that values equality. Understanding what

discrimination, culture bias, and stereotyping might look like is an important step.

Here are some examples of such situations:

- Overhearing an employee complain about a person being on government assistance but having an expensive cell phone.
- Not choosing an older employee to represent the company at a job fair because you believe a younger person would be better at recruiting.
- An employee making comments implying that a family of Hispanic origin won't pay their bill due to being illegal.
- Using racial slurs and any derogatory language about another person or employee's religion, sexual orientation, financial status, gender, age, etc.
- Implying that women are not fit for certain jobs.

- Making a joke about a Muslim patient, customer, or employee's Hijab.

Have you or your employees encountered similar situations? Have you laughed at an "off colored joke?" Have you heard an employee say something derogatory about a race or religion and simply looked the other way? Have you had an employee complain about discrimination but did nothing to investigate or stop it? If so, it's time for change!

The first step is to be an **advocate** for your minority employees. Give them the same opportunities as you would any other employee--recommend them for projects, and praise them to senior leadership. Most importantly tell them you are their advocate.

The second step is to **validate** your employees. Praising and rewarding accomplishments allows employees to see that their differences and hard work are valued and appreciated. It also empowers your employees to see that not only are they a part of the team but that their input is needed and important.

The final step is to **respond!** If an employee has a concern or complaint, investigate, follow-up, and take appropriate action to resolve the issue right away; however, don't wait for an issue to arise before taking steps to make your workplace safe and inclusive. Prevention is

best, especially when it comes to your employees' well-being and safety. Strict policies against harmful and discriminatory behavior will help protect your employees and demonstrate that you have their back. So make sure everyone knows what those policies are.

Diversity in the workplace is important and creating a culture where people from all backgrounds feel included needs to be a priority. Inclusivity is the key to creating a happy and healthy work culture. As leaders, when you advocate, validate and respond immediately and appropriately you foster inclusivity.

Ascension WI EAP
For additional support contact your Employee Assistance Program.
Services are free and confidential.

800-540-3758 | **eap@ascension.org**
AscensionWIEAP.org