Walking the Walk

Advancing the diversity and inclusion efforts of AIR

BY AMY MEADOWS

In 2014, The American Institutes for Research (AIR), one of the world’s largest behavioral and social science research and evaluation organizations, decided to make an important change in the way it approaches diversity and inclusion. While the concept has always been engrained in its internal efforts, the Washington, D.C.-based organization’s leaders felt that it was time to formalize and institutionalize the work that it had been doing, guided for years by a dedicated D&I committee.

“Diversity and inclusion is not just an HR tactic for us at AIR. It is core to our mission,” says Dr. Karen B. Francis, principal researcher and chair of AIR’s Diversity and Inclusion Council. “We work in communities around the world, and we need a diverse, culturally competent workforce to conduct research, analyze data and address the needs of the people we support. Our focus is on empowering communities and institutions, and the communities we work in around the world are diverse — racially, ethnically and geographically. We have to focus on cultural competence and allow our diversity and inclusion efforts to help inform our work.”

With that in mind, the D&I committee gathered feedback and recommendations from leadership and employees to determine the best way to enhance the organization’s D&I efforts. The results provided several ideas, the first of which was moving from a D&I committee to...
more formal Diversity and Inclusion Council. “The committee served in an advisory role to our senior leadership. The feedback we received revealed that, to truly integrate our D&I efforts throughout the organization as a whole, it would be necessary to move from having a D&I committee to having a D&I Council,” Francis notes. “That way, instead of working in an advisory role, we would be able to be in a leadership role and provide information and guidance for AIR’s overall D&I initiative.”

This transition also called for the establishment of an official diversity and inclusion office and the hiring of a seasoned individual who would be responsible for the overall management and administration of the organization’s diversity and inclusion plan and activities. These initiatives received funding through a budget line item at the corporate level, and Mónica Villalta was brought in as the chief diversity officer.

“The journey we have taken is about walking the walk and talking the talk. As an organization, we have to come from a place of understanding about what diversity and inclusion really means and actually living it within our organization to be effective in providing services,” Francis observes. “If we are conducting research, we have to understand all of the cultural nuances within that community. We have to know how to respectfully enter these communities and be effective in the work we do.”

One way to achieve this goal involves the organization’s six employee resource groups (ERGs), which include Access AIR (for people with disabilities), AIR AIM (Asians in Motion), Air BLAAC (Black, Latino, African-American, African and Caribbean) Diaspora Network, AIR CREW (for the remote employee workforce), AIR Pride (LGBT) and AIR Viva (for Hispanic, Latino and Chicano employees). According to Francis, these groups are instrumental in providing information and resources to employees throughout AIR, hosting talks and webinars, and engaging in dialogues about culture that further the organization’s D&I efforts both internally and externally.

Now, the 18-member Diversity and Inclusion Council’s goal is to help the D&I office develop benchmarks and key performance indicators that will help measure the organization’s progress in the D&I space. What’s more, for the last year and a half, Francis and a team of colleagues have worked to develop culturally and linguistically appropriate standards that can be applied to projects across the organization. “The standards will provide guidance at all levels about how to infuse cultural competence into all projects,” Francis says. “We are piloting the standards with select groups now and plan to launch them to the organization as a whole within a year. These standards will help us with quality improvement so we can identify where any cultural competence gaps are and address them.”

As AIR works to produce improvements in education, health and the workforce around the world, as well as provide innovative solutions and technical assistance in countless communities, the organization looks to the future with even more formalized and institutionalized D&I initiatives, including diversity and inclusion basics training for every current and incoming employee. AIR also is putting forth a concerted effort to recruit candidates from diverse backgrounds. “We are forward thinking and progressive, and we know that addressing diversity and inclusion is hard work. But it is work we must do if we are to be effective,” Francis concludes. “We are looking for meaningful integration of D&I initiatives into the fabric of our organization. We want to fully integrate those goals in a meaningful and measurable way. This is about a journey towards cultural competence.”