

## **Adding Diversity Awareness to Your Leadership Skill Set**

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## Introduction

To effectively manage today's workforce, leaders must understand that diversity has many facets and is not limited to gender or race. To ensure safety in the workplace and to improve the quality of life in all of its aspects, we need to understand diversity, to embrace our diversity, and respect our differences as much as we accept our similarities. The American Society of Safety Engineers is committed specifically to supporting diversity within The Society itself. To that end, The Society formed The Diversity Committee. While not a committee of diversity experts, they are members of ASSE from a variety of backgrounds that bring their experiences together for the benefit of The Society. The specific purpose of The Diversity Committee is to provide inclusion without regard to race, ethnicity, religion, personal beliefs, age, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, or physical challenges by providing advice and guidance to the Society to:

- Encourage an inclusive and diverse membership, leadership and staff
- Promote a global culture of inclusion and cooperation
- Address diversity related issues for the safety, health and environmental professional, workforce, and community

The Committee continues to discuss the challenges of protecting people, property and the environment in a diverse world. Overcoming language barriers is one example of these challenges, as is accommodating variations in physical stature. In many respects, these are some of the easiest challenges to overcome; the more difficult challenges reside in the unseen differences – those of attitude and education. Today's leaders must understand cultural norms and traditions, disabilities, religious traditions and practices, and the influence history has had in shaping generations. The Diversity Committee and guest member, Garlapati Ashok, have chosen to share insights and personal experiences relating to diversity in an interview format.

## Meet the Panelists

**Jamal M. AbuSneineh** is a Risk Specialist, Loss prevention consultant with the City of Portland. Jamal was born and raised in the old city of Jerusalem, Palestine. Growing up in an ancient tourist bound City allowed for exposure to many people. He spent a great deal of time participating in athletics from Soccer to Tennis. Jamal earned his BA in 1986 from Bethlehem University which is located in the west bank and in 1992 he earned his MST from Portland State University which is located in Oregon. Mr. AbuSneineh has coached several sports and worked with young and old, white and African American. Currently, he is President of the Columbia-Willamette ASSE Chapter. He is interested in history and human interaction, as well as, diversity issues. Jamal has been involved at the City of Portland's affirmative action committee and has helped with monthly celebration of cultures.

**Garlapati Ashok** was born in the State of Andhra Pradesh, India. His studies and work in different States of India exposed him to different languages and cultures of India. He moved to the State of Kuwait in the year 2000 to work with the Kuwait Oil Company, where he interacts with a workforce of more than 50 nationalities; each having different background, skills and experience levels. Presently, he is the President of ASSE-Kuwait Chapter, which has a membership 250 members from more than fifteen nations. During his course of education,

employment and as an ASSE volunteer, Garlapati has faced and experienced the varying challenges of diverse cultures, workforces, and many languages.

**Kelly Bernish** has lived in Orlando Florida with her two teenage daughters since 2000, arriving via northern California and northeastern Ohio, where she grew up. A graduate of Kent State University, in Ohio, Kelly has spent her entire career with SeaWorld/Anheuser-Busch in the Safety, Health & Environmental field in three different locations in the United States. Currently, she is the Director of Environmental, Health and Safety for SeaWorld of Florida, Inc. Kelly has been a member of ASSE since 1997 and is currently the Chairperson of the common interest group known as WISE, Women in Safety Engineering. She is also the immediate past President of the Central Florida Chapter of ASSE, and is involved in several other professional as well as personal interest organizations. She enjoys adventure, meeting people, experiencing other cultures, and has traveled to many different countries on four different continents. Her love for sports and anything outdoors is shared by her two daughters and enjoyed with her three dogs, cat and horse.

**Dale Holly Kahaukapu Brito** works as a Risk Control Consultant for First Insurance Company of Hawaii, Ltd. She was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii, and currently lives in Kailua on the island of Oahu. Dale was educated at a private school for children of Hawaiian ancestry. Her diverse heritage includes ancestors of Hawaiian, English, Irish, and Spanish descent. Living in Hawaii all her life, she has been exposed to multi-ethnic people, foods, traditions, and beliefs throughout her life. An ASSE member since 1993, Dale has held several officer positions in the ASSE Hawaii Chapter and is a current member of the Society's Diversity Committee.

**Rixio E. Medina** is Vice President of Health, Safety, Security, Environmental Protection and Shared Services for CITGO Petroleum Corporation in Houston, Texas. Rixio was born and raised in Venezuela and came to the United States in 1974 for college and returned in 1981 for graduate school. After working eight years overseas, he and his family relocated to the United States in 1990. He served as a presidential appointee on the United States Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board in Washington, D.C. and previously he served two terms as safety representative on the National Advisory Committee on Occupational Safety and Health (NACOSH). For two years Mr. Medina chaired of the Civil Service Commission and was vice-chair of the Civil Service Board for the City of Corpus Christi, Texas. Rixio is the recipient of the ASSE President's Award for his work as an international emissary.

**Terrie S. Norris** is Risk Control Manager, Bickmore Risk Services working in their Southern California office. Born in Michigan, she spent the first fifteen years of her life as an Air Force dependent living in New York, the Philippine Islands, Hawaii, Ohio, England, and Michigan. An ASSE member since 1987, she has served as an officer in the West Michigan and Orange County chapters. Terrie currently serves on the ASSE Board of Directors as the Region One Vice President and is the Chair of the Society's Diversity Committee. She is a recipient of the Society's Culbertson Award for her work on the Diversity Committee. Her heritage includes: English, German, Dutch, and Native American Indian.

**Linda G. Rhodes**, CSP currently serves as the General Manager of System Safety for the Chicago Transit Authority. Linda is a tomboy from Mansfield, Ohio. She received a degree in Industrial and Systems Engineering from Ohio University, and earned her Certified Safety Professional designation in 1995. Her participation in athletics and various volunteer

organizations over the years has exposed Linda to diverse cultures, as has her employment in various industries (manufacturing, food, not-for-profit and transportation). Linda enjoys sampling Chicago restaurants with her husband, Julius, of eighteen years and her two teenage children.

## How do you define diversity?

**Jamal AbuSneineh:** Diversity is the presence of a wide range of variation in the qualities or attributes of cultures, societies, communities, companies and workgroups. It is the state of being different or diverse. Diversity is used to describe people and population. It encompasses such things as age, gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and religion, as well as education, professional background, and marital parental status. It carries with it an array of subject matter and connotations. It has also been defined as the full utilization of all human resource potential. Diversity is understanding, respecting, and valuing differences while translating commonalities towards effectively achieving a common objective or goal.

**Garlapati Ashok:** If you look into the dictionary for the meaning of Diversity, it provides you the meaning of mixture, varieties, range, assortment etc. Workplace diversity refers to the variety of differences between people in an organization. That sounds simple, but diversity encompasses race, gender, ethnic group, age, personality, cognitive style, tenure, organizational function, education, background and more.

Diversity not only involves how people perceive themselves, but how they perceive others. Those perceptions affect their interactions. For a wide assortment of employees to function effectively as an organization, human resource professionals need to deal effectively with issues such as communication, adaptability and change. Diversity will increase significantly in the coming years. Successful organizations recognize the need for immediate action and are ready and willing to spend resources on managing diversity in the workplace now.

**Kelly Bernish:** Diversity, in my opinion, is the characteristics of a person that make them who they are. It is not physical characteristics necessarily, as those are just outward signs of the true diversity of each person. Diversity may come from the ethnic, religious and cultural roots of people as well as their specific life experiences and genetic makeup.

**Dale Brito:** I define diversity as individuals/groups/organizations of varying race, cultural background, religious preference, sexual orientation, physical size or shape, or special needs and disabilities working together for a common cause or goal.

Located in the middle of the ocean, Hawaii is one of those places that must adapt and accept diversity as part of daily living. Being a resort location, people from all over the world visit and sometimes choose to live here. Those who have grown up here consider diversity a way of life. Our University offers a section that caters to International students and our schools provide English classes for students whose first language is not English. A majority of the residents born in Hawaii are multi-ethnic, and they are encouraged to study and know their cultural history and language. We have international embassies, a wide variety of churches, and celebrate a variety of holidays associated with many diverse cultures. Our daily diet is multi-ethnic and is comprised of foods, such as, American, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hawaii, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, etc. What is considered normal here probably would not be in Middle America. We are exposed to

cultural traditions and celebrations almost on a daily basis and have learned to accept them without judgment or question.

**Rixio Medina:** Diversity is the acceptance and inclusion of people of different gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion, language, nationality, work style and experience, education, culture, organization function, approach to problem solving, physical appearance, personality type, liberal or conservative thinking and socio-economical status, using the strength of their differences to improve the group's output while working towards a common goal.

**Terrie Norris:** Growing up I did not know about diversity; I just knew that I was different because of the way I was treated. My father was in the military which meant frequent relocations, so I was always that new kid who "wasn't from around here." I spoke differently. I dressed differently. I did not have the same shared childhood memories – I was an outsider. As I entered the workforce, I often found that my opinions were not taken seriously because I was "just a kid." In working with educators in the public sector, I discovered that education made a difference, and the number and types of abbreviations following your name can often determine the level of respect you are afforded. Diversity goes beyond the most frequently recognized race and gender. It also involves geography, language, accent, age, life experiences, education, heritage, disabilities, and religion.

**Linda Rhodes:** Diversity is differences in people that stem from not only how they are 'hard-wired,' but also how their different exposures and experiences help shape who they are.

There's a self-awareness that can come from taking personality profiles (such as Myers-Briggs) and from being conscious of what motivates us. There's nothing more relaxing to me, for example, than being alone after a long day at work. My sister, on the other hand, would prefer to have a house-full of friends after a long day. We've always been that way. It's who we are, besides being African American females, and mothers, and art lovers,...

## **In what ways does diversity affect communication?**

**Jamal AbuSneineh:** It affects communication in so many ways and quite often leads to misunderstandings. Every one of us comes from a different background with different experiences that lead to different results. Because of this, each one of us brings something different to the table. We each bring a different set of skills, knowledge, and experience that makes up the diversity of us all. It's in this diversity that we can flourish as a group and enhance our environment. Communication is the most important part of success of any group or organizations.

**Garlapati Ashok:** Every organization takes full advantage of diversity. In this process, they will face many challenges particularly related to Communication. Perceptual, cultural and language barriers need to be overcome for diversity programs to succeed. Ineffective communication of key objectives results in confusion, lack of teamwork, and low morale. This leads to negative impact on the overall objectives of the organization if the communication issues are not handled properly.

**Kelly Bernish:** Effective communication is one of the biggest challenges we all face. Diversity, or the experiences, characteristics, beliefs and cultural differences, we all bring to the communication table, add to that challenge. The tendency for people to project their beliefs onto or to stereotype people who are outwardly diverse or different from them, may affect the way communication happens or as the case may be, doesn't happen. And the same can be said for the person receiving the message and the filters they may apply to the message. Additionally, hand gestures, body language and slang language styles may have a completely different meaning in diverse populations. For example, in my work environment where we have guests from all over the world everyday, thumbs up means everything is ok to me, whereas to someone else thumbs up means the number one...it can be as simple as that. Other cultures specifically prohibit touching one another casually or kissing, whereas other cultures welcome a kiss on each cheek as a greeting.

**Dale Brito:** There are many different ways of saying the same thing, just as there are many different ways of interpreting what is said. Each of us hears things differently, based on our beliefs, cultural background, etc. Effective communication hinges on knowing our audience and being able to make adjustments to suit them. An audience will translate what they hear into ideas based on their own beliefs and cultural background. Diversity introduces a variety of views, ideas, and thoughts into a conversation, expanding a single idea in many directions.

Non-verbal communication is another aspect that must be taken into consideration. It too is affected by beliefs, cultural background, etc. and can be easily misinterpreted. Everyone uses mannerisms and body language when speaking. Because of this, though an individual may intend to say one thing, their spoken message may be interpreted as something totally different because of their non-verbal message.

**Rixio Medina:** A diverse group will face communication challenges. One challenge I have experienced is the problem solving approach common in the American society. We talk over an issue and usually want to quickly define the problem and find a solution for it. The quicker the better. Safety professionals are trained to recognize hazards, evaluate them and compare options and taking immediate corrective actions when needed. Other cultures and professionals may see and understand the same problem, but generally want to evaluate the issue in more detail before attempting to fix it. They are not slower thinkers; but want to understand more the details before acting. Our communicating style often is to get to the point and to move directly from point A to point B, in a logical manner without digression. Other cultures communication patterns are not only driven by efficiency but by a desire to explore the context, taking time to explore related matters. I must discipline myself not to let this "learned skill" affect my communication efforts with individuals that don't have the same sense of urgency I usually have. We need to recognize that other people may be different from us and may not respond to a given situation the same way we do. Understanding and keeping in mind those individual differences will help us be more effective when interacting with a diverse group.

**Terrie Norris:** In today's mobile world, most of us have experienced language barriers. If we do not speak the same language it interferes with sharing our experiences and knowledge. It creates hazards within the workplace when we can not communicate expected behaviors or warning signs can not be read. However, Diversity's effect on communication is much more subtle than mere language differences. Take the United States of American for example; the differences in regional accents and speed at which English is spoken in those regions can make it difficult from someone

in say, the northeast region of the country, to communicate with someone from the southeast. I learned Arabic for a trip to the Middle East, but found that while the accent I acquired from my language tape was perfect in Egypt, it was slightly off in Jordan. I had the opportunity to live in England as a girl, and the language was the same and the accent not too difficult, but the words did not always have the same meaning. As an example, when I asked for chips, meaning potato chips, I was served French fries, and when I wanted a cookie, I needed to ask for a biscuit.

And those are just examples of the differences in spoken communication. The diversity in non-verbal communication adds another nuisance to successful communication. In many cultures, the comfort zone for communication is at a distance, bows are exchanged rather than handshakes, direct eye contact is not accepted in one culture where it is expected in another. All these differences increase the need for communication training and increased self-awareness. The successful leader will develop an understanding of the language, the meaning of commonly used phrases, and the acceptable non-verbal communication characteristics of the workforce and business place in which they work and live.

**Linda Rhodes:** Diversity can affect communication in negative ways and positive ways. Diversity can affect communication in a negative way by presenting challenges to those unwilling to understand from where others are coming. I work with someone who is unwilling to accept that anybody has ideas (besides hers) that have merit. Therefore, when anyone who is very different from her (which is most people) express ideas, she is condescending and dismissive. Communication with her is offensive and quite ineffective.

Diversity can affect communication in a good way by signaling insightful contributions. I know a business leader in Chicago who has developed a significant respect for diverse viewpoints. Therefore, when he is confronted with an idea from someone who is very different from him, he is more than eager to discuss it. Communication with him is a delight and quite effective.

## **What have you done to encourage diversity within your Chapter, Region or the Society?**

**Jamal AbuSneineh:** Within my chapter, I have encouraged recruitment of female members, as well as, members from diversity background to join the executive committee and volunteer for chapter activities. Our committee consists of four men and seven women who are from diverse backgrounds. Our various committees are diverse in nature with seven chairs being held by two women and five men.

**Garlapati Ashok:** I am currently President of the ASSE-Kuwait Chapter. Our Chapter has a membership base of about 250 members. Upstream and downstream oil industry attracts employees from almost 200 countries. Our Chapter membership also consists of more than fifteen countries and their experience levels range from 1 to 25 years of experience in different industrial sectors, such as, construction, mechanical, petrochemicals, and upstream and downstream oil industries. Therefore, membership needs are completely different and diverse in nature.

An organization's success and competitiveness depends upon its ability to embrace diversity resources and realize their benefits. Therefore, we have utilized their expertise levels to our benefit in following ways:

- Encourage experienced members to share their experience with junior members by conducting technical meetings, seminars and training programs.
- Encourage junior members to take part in leadership roles, through participation as committee members, volunteers for Professional Development Conferences, and outreach activities.
- Publish multi-language technical articles and bulletins to reach our diverse membership.
- Provide membership renewal for volunteering activities, subsidize training programs, host recognition programs to increase the involvement of members in society activities.

**Kelly Bernish:** That's easy – my passion is WISE – Women in Safety Engineering. I have been blessed by the opportunity to chair an incredible organization of women – all diverse within their own right - working in the Safety, Health, and Environmental field. So I get to influence that each and every day. Through this incredible group we have the opportunity to influence recruitment and networking within our field and provide a platform to everyone to be exposed to incredible diversity. I also have a mentee through our mentoring program within WISE that is valuable and educational for both of us! Then of course there is my involvement in this committee, the ASSE Diversity Committee. It has been nothing short of an amazing and fulfilling opportunity to meet and interact with people from all over the world! Finally, there is my never-ending effort to support endowments and scholarships for people of diverse backgrounds. I thankfully have some resources to support financially those efforts as well as encourage others to do the same every chance I get!

**Dale Brito:** Because of our location, we cannot help but have a culturally diverse Chapter. I actively participate in our bi-annual conference and encourage individuals in our field, no matter where they are from or who they work for, to join the Society. I have shared many of the things I have learned while a member of the Diversity Committee with my Chapter and fielded questions from our members.

**Rixio Medina:** I have had the opportunity to provide assistance to our society and profession on its effort to be more diverse and inclusive. When recommending the appointment of members to committees, I have identified individuals from different backgrounds and encouraged several Hispanics safety professionals from overseas to join ASSE and mentored them in pursuing professional certification. The ASSE Foundation has allowed me to join other very giving members and sponsoring companies in providing scholarships and professional development grants for those in need of such assistance. I am thrilled of being able to sponsor the Hispanics in Safety and the Diversity Committee scholarships. ASSE has given me the opportunity to be the face and the Spanish voice of the society in a couple of professional conferences in Mexico and in presentations to the Secretary of Labors, Union Leaders and Businessmen of five countries in a tour through Central America with representatives of the US Department of Labor. Finally, through the ASSE Diversity Committee, I have been able to work with very talented volunteers and staff members in developing strategies and implementing actions to assist our society to improve its diversity standing.

**Terrie Norris:** As Chair of the Society's Diversity Committee, I was faced with the challenge of finding new volunteers when it came time to rotate the committee's membership. So I reached out



to members who could bring a new voice to the committee. Our committee is diverse in its age groups, genders, ethnic heritages, education, life experience, religions, work experiences, and length of membership within the profession and within the Society. We are tasked with understanding the makeup of our Society and encouraging its continued diversity.

At a Regional level, as Vice President of Region, I have tried to balance the needs of the chapters throughout the region by ensuring geographic representation on the Region's Executive Committee. In my day to day living, I encourage membership within the Society for safety professionals wherever I meet them regardless of any labels that might be applied to them. I have worked hard to change the image of our Society of being a National organization, to what it is, an International organization. Therefore, I encourage everyone I meet to refer to all Society positions and activities above the Regional level as "Society" activities, committees, etc. rather than "national."

When meeting members from other chapters throughout the world, I open my ears to learn more about the challenges they are facing as safety, health, environmental professionals. I have also been working to ensure that we address the diversity of dietary needs when planning Society sponsored meals to ensure that we accommodate the needs of all of our members. The goal is to be inclusionary and to make all members feel welcome and part of our great organization.

**Linda Rhodes:** I encourage appreciation for the value that is added by long-service members. I encourage their active participation, despite the unwitting tendency by new members to shut them out. Within my Chapter, I also took opportunities to recruit members who were underrepresented.

My activity on the Society level has given me an opportunity to mentor others. Those of us who look different than 'traditional' Society leaders get numerous questions from members and potential members who are trying to decide if they fit. We have to be open and honest about the benefits and the challenges associated with active involvement.

A woman approached me at the Leadership Conference one year and asked me how I could be so active on the Society level without compromising my work/life balance. We had a great conversation about choices and priorities and she ultimately committed to get more involved. Her concerns were ultimately based on misperceptions about how much time it would actually take to participate on Chapter, Regional and/or Society level committees.

## **How have you dealt with diversity and inclusion on a personal level?**

**Jamal AbuSneineh:** On a personal level, I am married to a woman who is not from my culture or society. My children are trilingual. I have been a chairperson of a Montessori preschool which has students from more than seven cultures and the teachers from various backgrounds. I am the only male on the school's board and the rest are females of Indian, the Middle-Eastern, American, and Pakistani heritage. I promote understanding and appreciation of other cultures and their heritage. I am also involved in interfaith meetings and gatherings.

**Garlapati Ashok:** I work as a Health, Safety, Environmental Specialist in Exploration and Production Development Directorate of the Company. More than 50 contracting companies work for our Directorate and many nationalities and diverse workforce are part of the contractor employees. I face many challenges. I adopted following steps in dealing the diversity at my work place:

1. Assessment of diversity in the workplace – The first step dealing with any issue starts with the assessment of it. We did the same. We conducted the assessment through employment satisfaction and need surveys.
2. Development of diversity in the workplace plan – The initial assessment and survey provided information on diversity issues as part of integral part of the management system. The plan has been made comprehensive, attainable and measurable.
3. Implementation of diversity in the workplace plan – The diversity plan in my organization has been implemented through management commitment and line management. This has been incorporated in every aspect of the organization's function and facilities.
4. Reassessment of Diversity Plan – Reassessment of the plan on periodic basis has helped us evaluate the plan and improvements were made wherever required.

**Kelly Bernish:** I am so lucky and thankful that I was raised in a diverse community and under diverse circumstances. I grew up in a college town that celebrated diversity and my mom is a journalist who exposed me to so many incredible experiences. Fast forward to today – I now have the very same opportunity for my children. I think we can all tell stories of negative experiences as a result of people's or organizational or governmental prejudices. For me it was just another challenge to make myself and those around me, better. I now have the tremendous responsibility and honor of influencing the minds of my two daughters to be open. Everyday at work, I am blessed to work with people of such tremendous diversity. One of my most rewarding opportunities is to work on initiatives of accessibility for people with disabilities. Our goal is to make our parks as accessible and inclusive as safely possible, a tremendously rewarding opportunity.

**Dale Brito:** Living in an area with an extremely diverse cultural base, I have learned (though unconsciously I think) to understand and appreciate the diversity of others and how this understanding can benefit me. Where I live, the majority can be considered a "mixed plate", very few individuals are of a single race or background. This forces us to learn a variety of traditions and histories. That understanding has made it much easier to work affectively with others.

Living in Hawaii, on what we fondly call "the rock", we tend to travel all over the world more than most. In our travels, we encounter a variety of problems because of our visual appearance and our tendency to speak rapidly. My ethnic back ground is Hawaiian, English, Irish, and Spanish, and my children inherited Portuguese from their father. Stereo typing is a problem. To many in the other States, a Hawaiian is perceived to be of Asian ancestry, which we are not. Depending on where we visit, we encounter changes in attitude and treatment because of how we look and speak. When we tell them we are from Hawaii, then things change.

Two of my children have attended College on the mainland and have related to me things that have happened to them and things they have observed. They have grown up understanding and accepting the differences in people and appreciating the diversity around them, so they sometime

have a hard time understanding why others do not feel the way they do. They know they are different and are proud of their multi-cultural heritage, and they share their experiences as often as they can. They have not let prejudices and misunderstandings affect them.

**Rixio Medina:** When I first came to the United States to attend college in 1974, I was one of the few Hispanics among several thousand students at Oklahoma State University. For a couple of years, I was the only Hispanic in the School of Protection and Safety. I had to work very hard to understand others and to make myself understood. I started as the “Hispanic guy”, but my performance at school and social interactions with other students later helped me gain their acceptance. I joined the International Student Association and became an officer to learn how the system worked. Later I organized and became the first president of the Latin American Student Association. The activities we conducted helped others at school and in the community better understand the Hispanic culture, food, music and art. I have experienced a few unpleasant situations that happened because I am a Hispanic. Today they are insignificant memories. I concentrate on the excellent opportunities and rewarding experiences this great country and ASSE have blessed me with and dedicate my efforts to continue the improvement of diversity.

**Terrie Norris:** On a personal level, the way I handled diversity has changed as I have grown. As a child I became adept at becoming a chameleon to fit in. I changed my accent, I learned new languages, and I learned to keep low to avoid becoming a target. As an adult, I continued to use the skills I developed as a child, and I added education and communication skills to my tool box. I learned to step out of the shadows and take risks to stand up for myself and what I believed in. Because of my educational and personal experiences, I was able to teach my children tolerance that was not present in the home that I grew up in. I work hard to ensure that the people in my world feel included and that they have a voice. In addition, I support diversity in a financial way by earmarking my annual ASSE Foundation donation for the ASSE Diversity Committee scholarship fund.

**Linda Rhodes:** Teaching my kids to value diversity and inclusion is ongoing and rewarding. There are frequent learning opportunities for me to make my kids aware of situations that encourage diversity and inclusion and those that don't. Recognizing this is only half of the lesson though. The other half involves teaching my kids how to handle both.

My 14 year old son was recently offended because he approached a museum employee for information and received none. In his presence, another guest approached the same museum employee and the employee almost tripped over himself to provide information. Maybe the employee snubbed my son based on his race and age, maybe not. Either way, I showed my son how to put focus on the information he was requesting as opposed to the potential personal slight.

In this scenario, upon approaching the employee the second time – with his mom in tow – my son received the information. If he hadn't, we may have escalated this to a supervisor or retrieved the information from another source, depending on the circumstances.

During the same Museum trip, my kids and I encountered two people who provided more information to us (unsolicited) than we could hold in our brains. They were impressed with my kids' quest for knowledge and bent over backwards to provide them what they needed. My kids felt excluded, then included, within a span of a few hours.

Ironically, society is made up of people who believe they never experience exclusion, those who believe they never experience inclusion, and those who experience some of both. These perceptions and experiences contribute to our diversity.

## Why do you think diversity is a good thing?

**Jamal AbuSneineh:** Let's start by saying that it is not a bad thing. I can't think of anything bad associated with increased diversity anywhere in one's life. Open mindedness, finding why people behave the way they do leads to solving many problems around the world. Furthermore, there is no down side to diversity. Greater understanding leads to greater trust which leads to greater appreciation of others. The bottom line is – the more the merrier.

**Garlapati Ashok:** Absolutely, diversity provides many benefits to any organization. When organizations actively assess their handling of workplace diversity issues, develop and implement diversity plans, multiple benefits can be obtained which include the following:

1. Increased adaptability – Organizations employing a diverse workforce can supply a greater variety of solutions to problems in service, sourcing, and allocation of resources. Employees from diverse backgrounds bring individual talents and experiences in suggesting ideas that are flexible in adapting to fluctuating markets and customer demands.
2. Broader service range – A diverse collection of skills and experiences (e.g. languages, cultural understanding) allow a company to provide service to customers on a global basis.
3. Variety of viewpoints – A diverse workforce that feels comfortable communicating varying points of view provides a larger pool of ideas and experiences. The organization can draw from that pool to meet business strategy needs and the needs of customers more effectively.
4. More effective execution – Companies that encourage diversity in the workplace inspire all of their employees to perform to their highest ability. Company-wide strategies can then be executed, resulting in higher productivity, profit, and return on investment.

**Kelly Bernish:** Diversity is not just a good thing – it is a MUST thing! How can you be the best that you can be without the help and influence of others? People who challenge you and stretch you? In my opinion, people who do not embrace diversity and inclusion are missing a big piece of life's puzzle.

**Dale Brito:** The world is diverse, how boring it would be if it was not. Diversity forces us to think outside ourselves, to hear opinions of others, and yet still allows us to form our own, possibly new opinions based on a larger view of things. Diversity contributes to the forming of new opinions, while still being able to strengthen the positive ones we already have. Diversity can even change a negative opinion to a positive one.

Diversity in the work place is mandated by global communications. To continue to be successful, companies must diversify to keep up. Boundaries have changed significantly and some no longer exist. The only way to see the big picture is to have more than one view or opinion from a variety of sources, to listen to what is being said/communicated, and act upon it. Diversity brings understanding, encourages participation, and opens doors to expanded ideas.

**Rixio Medina:** Diversity in a work group is a good attribute to have because it provides a great opportunity to:

- Fully utilize the strength and potential contributions of all participants.
- Eliminate/ reduce barriers that stand in the way of inclusion and full participation.
- Unleash the creativity that comes through drawing from different ideas and backgrounds.
- Create an atmosphere where all persons feel the freedom to ask for assistance.
- Actively seek information and participation from people of a variety of backgrounds and cultures in order to develop a broad picture and the best answer to the issue being addressed.
- Build relationships and demonstrate respect and fairness in our interactions.
- Create a team spirit in which each person feels they belong and are a contributing member.

**Terrie Norris:** Diversity provides us with a rich and vibrant environment. It provides choices. However, it is the acceptance of diversity that is critical to success in business and the creation of a world at peace. Diversity is not a choice; it is a fact. We need to understand the benefits and strengths that diversity brings to us in order to take full advantage of its benefits. Take the differences in ages as an example. We need the knowledge that only experience can provide, but we also need the innocence and enthusiasm that is brought the table when failure has not yet been experienced. We also need the knowledge that newly educated people bring to the mix. We need diversity in our leadership to ensure not only the inclusion of diverse segments of the population, but also the buy-in of those segments in support of our goals and objectives. Nothing is achieved in a vacuum, and success is dependent on the support of all the diverse populations affected by the decisions made.

**Linda Rhodes:** Without it, we're all redundant – same ideas, same solutions to problems, no growth, little creativity, etc.

A diversity professional with a consumer products company told a story about diversity at a conference I attended. She said that just before her company launched a new food product line targeted at a specific ethnic group, the company decided to consult members of this ethnic group within their organization. A special task force was formed and thanks to the company's decision to tap into its own diverse resources, this product line was a resounding success.

## **How do you work with, lead or manage a diverse group and how do you do so in an inclusionary fashion?**

**Jamal AbuSneineh:** Every individual is unique and has a set of norms that drives him or her. With that understanding, I consider everyone that I interact with to be unique and I work hard on my assumptions and removing biases from my work. With that I lead and encourage others to do the same. I preach the concept of diversity and understanding with everyone that I work with, and I hope this will lead to a greater understanding of others.

**Garlapati Ashok:** As I noted above about the challenges and benefits of working with diverse groups, the significant challenge is it bringing them together and working together to achieve the organization goals. First, I try to understand their diverse backgrounds to feel comfortable that their values are being included in the programs. A diverse working environment increases the

tendency of diverse employees to stay with the organization and be productive for a long time. When working with diverse groups I ensure effective interaction or comfort level between individuals and groups that may differ from each other in a broad range of areas—including, but not limited by—race, color, creed, age or gender. Another way to manage the diverse group is to provide an incentive for those groups who are effectively working to meet the organization goals.

**Kelly Bernish:** I think the key is realizing EVERYONE is diverse. It's not something you can see from the outside all of the time. It's really about being open to everyone. I lead the Safety, Health, & Environment efforts for a company of nearly 6 thousand employees and millions of guests, both groups from all over the world, every age range and ability. My Safety, Health, & Environment team is successful only because of our diversity. I can't imagine nor do I want to imagine a world without diversity. I do imagine and dream of a world in which diversity is embraced more freely!

**Dale Brito:** I consider all groups I work with as diverse. Every person's opinion is important, and I encourage group members to openly express themselves. I do not form judgments based on their opinions or views, neither does the group. Instead, we work together to have an understanding of each individual's perspective and create a solution that will satisfy everyone in the group. No one person has all the answers. Conversations can get rather heated, but that is expected when people are passionate about their beliefs. The results are a true compilation of everyone involved.

**Rixio Medina:** This is very simple for me. I just try to follow the golden rule "*treat others as you would like to be treated*." For example, I like to be involved in decision making and I let others participate in the process. I like to be heard and therefore let others express themselves. I like to be challenged and offered opportunities and I continuously find ways to do just that with those capable and willing to accept the challenges and opportunities (some may say that I overdue it). Having said that, the key is not to "force" someone to do something they don't want to do but to create and maintain an environment where individuals can participate, make contributions and are recognized for their efforts.

**Terrie Norris:** Early on in my career, the company that I worked for developed Quality Teams and expended an extensive amount of resources to ensure that those teams developed good communication and consensus decision making skills. Because of the foresight of James River Corporation, we were able to have the same training extended to our nine safety committees. Part of the training included appreciation of the differing experiences and communication styles of the team members. I have used the knowledge gained from that experience in leading teams ever since. Within a team environment, everyone is encouraged to voice their opinion and to contribute to the project. The team members are also encouraged to take on a variety of roles, from recording the events, to leading the meeting, or even facilitating the meeting. Critical to the success of any team is ensuring a diverse representation of the stakeholders. This inclusion helps to ensure the success of any project.

**Linda Rhodes:** By trying to understand everyone's strengths and challenges and figuring out how to use them to accomplish objectives. The key is to appreciate (not tolerate) the differences, and understand that it's not enough to invite everyone to the table. The environment has to be such that all members of a group recognize the desire for and benefits of their contributions.

## Why is diversity such a big challenge?

**Jamal AbuSneineh:** Because, people make it so. Because of the wrong assumption that certain groups are better than others or visa versa. Because of ignorance and lack of understanding and the unwillingness of many people, companies, groups and committees...etc to accept the ever changing world. The world is not big anymore. Advancements in communication and technology have made it easier for us to watch, learn, and communicate with others, thus learning and understanding, as well as, appreciating others is a natural outcome. To categorize and place others in a box never leads to productive results. Unfortunately, quite often that's what happens. To learn about other cultures and backgrounds means we have to abandon our comfort zone. If we do that, then we can begin to see the beauty and the rewards of diversity.

**Garlapati Ashok:** There are many challenges in handling diversity issues in big organizations. Significant challenges are as follows:

1. Resistance to change – There are always employees who will refuse to accept the fact that the social and cultural makeup of their workplace is changing. The “we’ve always done it this way” mentality silences new ideas and inhibits progress.
2. Implementation of diversity in the workplace policies – This can be the overriding challenge to all diversity advocates. Armed with the results of employee assessments and research data, they must build and implement a customized strategy to maximize the effects of diversity in the workplace for their particular organization.
3. Successful Management of Diversity in the Workplace – Diversity training alone is not sufficient for any organization’s diversity management plan. A strategy must be created and implemented to create a culture of diversity that permeates every department and function of the organization, which is a big challenge.

**Kelly Bernish:** I really do not know. If I were to guess I would say that it is because people naturally want to be with people that are like them. As a result, they are ignorant to the realities of others which perpetuate the whole notion of exclusion. It really is mind boggling to me. I find people in general to be so interesting it is hard to imagine why people would want to isolate themselves and live in a one-dimensional world.

**Dale Brito:** Diversity is a big challenge because it is impossible to understand everyone’s point of view; not everyone is exposed to diversity. While diversity is good in obtaining a variety of information, it does cause conflicts because of opposing view points. In order to overcome such conflicts, we need to understand why we have opposing view points that are usually a direct result of cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Because cyberspace presents us so easily with so many ideas and the expansion of joint ventures through out the world, all of us must accept and learn to understand the diversities in each of us to better communicate and grow.

As individuals, many people do not understand or accept Diversity and do not feel they need to. Many do not know the true meaning of “DIVERSITY.” In some companies, it is a “corporate” problem, not an individual problem. Accepting Diversity as a learned response takes time and effort. To be a truly diverse world, it will take time and education. Much of the challenge to

accepting diversity involves getting past some of the misunderstandings and differences that make us diverse in the first place.

**Rixio Medina:** Diversity is a big challenge because it is all about people. Even the most controlled and even thinking person has his or her bad day which can impact the way they relate to others. Diversity should not be something we need to be obsessed with it to the extreme that we push people away, but rather an approach to effectively interact with others, regardless of our differences.

**Terrie Norris:** One of the greatest challenges for diversity is gaining an understanding of it. In a meeting I once attended when diversity was being discussed, one of members stated, “Well, we don’t have to address women’s issues, since that is no longer a diversity issue.” I thought the room would implode from the sudden intake of breath from the other members of the committee. Diversity is often reduced to a head count or a checklist, without a true inclusion or understanding of what the issues are. We need to create a greater understanding of diversity in order to gain a greater acceptance of our diversity. We need to come out of the Dark Ages where the fear of something different was great, to accepting our differences as a gift that enhances our world.

**Linda Rhodes:** If by being a ‘challenge’ we mean ‘maintaining diverse and inclusive environments’, diversity is not a big challenge for many people. This group has invested the effort into understanding how their lives can benefit from diversity and inclusion and in creating the mechanisms that support a diverse and inclusive environment. For other people, diversity is a big challenge, and very much resisted, because of their misperceptions about consequences and benefits.

In my experience, it’s common for some people to feel more comfortable interacting with people who they feel are more like them (in how they look, how they think, etc). Unfortunately, this comfort level can contribute to making diversity a challenge for them. I have friends in Florida who have dedicated their retirement to making sure an entire class of underprivileged children successfully complete primary school and have the finances to complete college. Diversity is not ‘challenge’ for them – it is a necessity.

## Summary

We hope that sharing the committee’s personal diverse experiences and opinions has given you a new view of the term “diversity.” Diversity is not so much a challenge as it is an opportunity. It helps expand our horizons, enrich our relationships and enhance our communities. As EHS professionals, we know the importance of our profession and the inclusion of EHS initiatives in the success of business. Understanding and appreciating diversity enriches the value of the EHS professional, and is a necessary to successfully compete on a global scale - taking EHS initiatives to the next level.

We challenge you to ask yourself the questions discussed above. Consider how you will encourage diversity and inclusion in your personal and professional lives. The Diversity Committee has taken a positive approach by establishing a Diversity Committee scholarship fund through the ASSE Foundation. That is just one of the things that we are doing. What will you do? Your role as a leader is to inspire others; therefore, we ask that you share your ideas and action



plans with the Diversity Committee. For more information about the Diversity Committee or how you can support the Diversity Scholarship, and to share your ideas with us please contact us in care of Susan Lewis, Manager of Chapter Services, at [slewis@asse.org](mailto:slewis@asse.org).