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The Business Case for Diversity & Inclusion

By: Keri Schmidt, CCE, IOM
2021 TCCE Treasurer
CEO, Fort Bend Chamber of Commerce

Fort Bend County, Texas is one of the most diverse communities in the United States. Among its over 800,000 residents, Fort Bend has an almost equal division in population among the nation's four major ethnic communities: Asian, African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian according to the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University in Houston. "The statistics for Fort Bend are just remarkable," said Dr. Stephen Klineberg, co-director of the Kinder Institute. "Fort Bend County is where the four communities meet in greater balance."

When I joined the Fort Bend Chamber of Commerce over twenty years ago, it was clear this balance was not reflected in our chamber membership or leadership. Despite ever-growing diversity in the population and in the business community, over 90% of our Directors were white and 73% of those were male. Our staff and membership fared better in terms of gender diversity, but in ethnic diversity, we were sorely lacking. As a result, our programming was also out of touch. From a strategic standpoint, it was clear that we had a challenge – our organization appealed to less than 20% of the business community and, with predicted population shifts, this number would only decrease.

Over ten years ago when I became the President/CEO, I recognized that this issue was critical for our Chamber's viability and future success. With the full support of the Board, we made a commitment to remake our chamber into a future-focused organization that would not only remedy the current imbalances but would also be a lightning rod for inclusion in all aspects of our community. Below are some of the strategic initiatives implemented to move our Chamber towards this goal:

- Diversity and inclusion are key components in our strategic planning.
- We strategically recruit a racially and gender-balanced class for the annual Fort Bend Leadership Forum. These Leadership Alumni become a candidate pool for future Board of Directors positions.
- We take an aggressive and proactive approach when filling staff positions and seating Directors, looking for candidates that can add to our diversity.
- Established a Diversity Action Team consisting of members with affiliations in our underserved communities. This group plans educational events to help our businesses address this issue.
- We collaborate and engage with dozens of diverse organizations, including other chambers that consider us friends in commerce.

Changes do not happen overnight, and demographics take time to reset. A little over ten years later, I am extremely proud of the ground we have gained. It takes personal commitment, leadership, and a willingness to meet the risks and challenges of change. Today, through strategic initiatives and a firm belief in diversity and inclusion, we are achieving our goals: the greater success of our Chamber programs; a diverse Board of Directors and staff; and we have strong relationships with numerous organizations that represent racially diverse communities.

From a personal perspective, I believe we are better for our combined diversity - in our communities, our cities, our counties, our nation, and certainly in our Chamber. From a business perspective, the Fort Bend Chamber is seeing real results that support a compelling case for diversity and inclusion. What is clear is that when chambers do not reflect the communities they serve, they risk their relevancy, funding opportunities, and credibility.