Ensuring equity in utility workplaces

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Experts often link diversity and inclusion with organizational and team success. But what does that look like in practice? Your colleagues from across the energy industry recently came together at the E Source Forum 2020 to discuss how to foster diversity and inclusion within their organizations. In honor of Black History Month, we wanted to revisit the roundtable discussion and share the powerful insights we learned during the online event.

The heartbreaking attacks on the Black community in 2020 caused a domino effect of change. Witnessing the injustices unfold on our TVs across the US opened our eyes and energized us to talk about what we saw. However, these issues are not new. The pain has existed for centuries. As we launch into Black History Month 2021, it's clear that we've talked enough. It's time for action.

Recognizing injustices in the workplace

One of the biggest places we see issues surrounding race and diversity is in the workplace. Among others, a lack of diversity at the C-level and discrepancies in pay are common issues. Inequality in the workplace should not and *cannot* be ignored any longer.



Equity and energy

Utilities can create equity in their communities by offering programs that relieve customers'high energy burden. Available to all E Source subscription members, our report What utilities can do to improve energy equity has advice on how to get started.

What can be done to chip away at these outdated and harmful habits ingrained in our organizations' practices? Natalie Schilling, vice president of Human Resources at Southern California Edison (SCE), participated in our panel and encouraged companies to listen to what employees have to say and what they *really* want. SCE achieves this with its Leading with Courage on Inclusion program, a tool kit for

managers to help facilitate conversations and offer a channel for open dialogue. The goal of the program is to understand and get to know one another better.

Creating a work environment that welcomes a community and allows employees to "bring their full selves to work" is critical. It creates a safe space, according to panelist Paula Glover, president and CEO of the American Association of Blacks in Energy (AABE). Glover emphasized the importance of a safe work environment, highlighting her organization's efforts to make AABE a safe place for all of its employees.

Glover then recognized that many utility leaders had an "aha!" moment in recent months and have been working hard to make improvements in their organizations. AABE's equity campaign, launched in September 2020, provides support to organizations that have had an "aha!" moment and are committed to having hard conversations to address issues and instill change.

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We can apply that mission in our day-to-day lives working alongside our colleagues. Let members of the organization teach others by sharing their experiences and stories of times when they felt left out and excluded. We must learn through storytelling and listen before taking action.

But it's critical that we start with empathy. We can't put the burden of education on our Black peers. Individuals have the power to educate themselves and practice what they learn. With empathy and care, these changes will go a long way. It's a magical equation: empathy + care = action.

Our panel had a wonderful exchange about some leaders simply not knowing what to say or do. They all agreed that it's perfectly OK to admit that we might not have the answer when faced with these courageous conversations on diversity. The discussion in and of itself is an opportunity to work together to find solutions.

Here are some steps utility leaders can take to stamp out racism in the workplace:

- *Start with yourself.* Be honest about your existing biases and take the responsibility to educate yourself and make changes.
- *Listen to others.* Take feedback from your employees. Listen to what they have to say and what needs to change, and consider equity over equality. Aim to meet everyone's unique needs instead of giving everyone the same offer with the assumption that it will solve everyone's problems.
- *Challenge yourself and your organization, and take action.* Improve diversity, especially at the highest levels of your company, and address pay discrepancies. Create zero-tolerance policies around racist behavior and enforce them.

Seeing reality through different lenses

During our conversation with the panelists, the topic of seeing color came up. Sherina Maye Edwards, partner in the Energy, Environment & Natural Resources Group at Quarles & Brady LLP, pointed out the problems with statements such as "I don't see race" and "I don't see color." She explained how those statements are alternative ways of saying "I don't see you."

The fact of the matter is that we *have* to see color and race in order to understand and eliminate the bias in our organizations. Black and Brown people have to work harder and do more to get what their

white counterparts get—or less than they get. If we can't admit that, we're simply being dishonest with ourselves.

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We all have to make an effort to see the different sides, realizing that two people can have two very different perceptions of one thing. A small but great example of this comes in the form of a dress. In 2015, a photo of a dress went viral when some of us claimed the dress was blue and black while others were convinced it was white and gold. The photo spread like wildfire and we found ourselves at odds. We were convinced we saw the photo accurately and anyone who saw it differently was wrong. What we failed to realize was that even though we were all looking at the same thing, we all perceived it differently. If you're curious, the New York Times broke down the science in Is That Dress White and Gold or Blue and Black?

While that example may seem a bit silly, it can be applied to seeing both sides when it comes to injustice and inequality. This isn't to say that Black employees are seeking our sympathy. Tana Session, founder and CEO of TanaMSession.com and our panel's moderator, explained how our Black colleagues don't need anyone to feel sorry for them. They simply want empathy and for others to understand what their experience has been. Then we can explore how the organization may have perpetuated that experience.

Change is possible. In fact, according to our panel, change is inevitable. US demographics are shifting. At the beginning of 2020, the US Census Bureau predicted that by midyear, the majority of the nation's children would be people of color. Utilities must think about what stats like that mean for their future and start designing an inclusive workplace. Our future is bright and diverse—who's with us? Leave a comment below and tell us about your utility's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

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