



Article from

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# PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

## Diversity and the SOA

By John Robinson

**A**t the 2015 Society of Actuaries (SOA) Annual Meeting, incoming president Craig Reynolds listed his five top priorities. Among them was his deep commitment to diversity and inclusion. Here's a brief history of my involvement with diversity, how Craig's interests and mine intersect, and what you can expect to see going forward. I will end with concrete suggestions for how you can play a role in strengthening diversity and inclusion in our profession.

In 1985 "John Robinson, ASA" left Jamaica to join the staff of a large life insurance company in the Midwest. I was the only actuary of Jamaican ethnicity, and the only actuary of color, in the company. I was hired at a time when there was a shortage of actuarial talent across the country, and getting an H-1 visa was "No problem" (a popular Jamaican phrase).

In my experience, actuaries are fair-minded individuals. I have heard stories of behavior that is inconsistent with that assessment; but I believe that those are isolated cases. So I had the same opportunities to succeed, in my exams and as a management trainee, as all of my peers. My company treated me well and fairly.

In early 1993, our chief actuary became aware of the then new concept of "diversity." He realized this was a great idea for both altruistic ("the right thing to do") and business perspectives. The subject was discussed within the actuarial leadership, and it was clear to me that it was gaining some traction.

The actuarial department, numbering about 100 actuaries and students, was invited to a presentation by one of the company's leading economists. The presenter made a number of remarks about various social groups that I thought lacked sensitivity. Sensing that I was not alone in that assessment, I wrote a letter to the chief actuary, copying other senior actuaries, criticizing the statements as inconsistent with diversity. The letter was well received. What I didn't realize was that I had just launched my career in diversity.

Toward the end of that year, the chief actuary arranged a multi-day training session on diversity for all FSAs, and I was invited to attend. The lead trainer was an African-American male, and he issued a strong challenge to this predominantly white male group. Some may have been affronted by a suggestion that they



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were "racist"; but they all embraced the idea that things were not as right as they should be.

It quickly became apparent that diversity must be about more than just race. The actuarial department created a committee to promote the values of diversity and inclusion within the department, which I chaired for nine years.

The business case for diversity is now well-known: If a company can leverage employees' differences, it will get the most productivity and creativity out of its employees, and most likely expand its markets and increase profitability.

About the same time, I became involved with the International Association of Black Actuaries (IABA), and was president from 2010 to 2013. Founded in 1992, the IABA seeks to expand racial/ethnic diversity within the actuarial profession, primarily in the United States. When I attended my first annual meeting, we met for half day on a Sunday, had a nice meal and a good presentation, and went home until the next year's annual meeting. Today, the organization has activities year-round and a full-time executive director.

In 2013, I was elected to the SOA Board of Directors, where I met Craig Reynolds. I started a conversation with SOA staff on how the SOA could help the IABA. The discussion went to the Board's Issues Advisory Council, where my idea and concern merged with others' regarding diversity.

The SOA had, in fact, long been concerned about (a) the lack of minority representation; and (b) the lack of female leadership. Until then these issues had been "on the back burner." The Issues Advisory Council considered this a worthy long-term venture, a view that was embraced by the Board. President Errol Cramer, himself a strong advocate, formed a task force, to be led by Craig Reynolds. I was asked to serve on the task force.

Now you really can't ask for more importance to be attached to something than to have the president-elect leading the charge. This signaled the highest possible level of prominence.

The task force met for a year, and has now given way to a standing Board committee, the Inclusion and Diversity Committee (IDC). The volunteers who direct it, and the staff who support us, are all very passionate about these issues.

There are two important questions that the committee must address: why and how.

**Why:** If diversity for a company is about employee productivity and increased profitability, why is diversity important for a profession? For some thoughts on this question, I invite you to read "Building an Inclusive Work Environment"<sup>1</sup> by Linda Shepherd, FCAS, MAAA, and Kwame Davis, FCAS, MAAA.

**How:** The committee has partitioned this into short term and long term. In the short term, we will develop a Diversity Statement (the Casualty Actuarial Society (CAS) already has one), and enhance diversity and inclusion at SOA meetings.

The long-term "how" is the most challenging question. For this, the task force reviewed the experience of the medical professions, which culminated in the Sullivan Report of 2004.<sup>2</sup> The Sullivan Commission leveraged the results of a research project that examined the barriers experienced by underrepresented minorities at all levels of the education system, from primary

school to medical school. They developed recommendations based on empirical facts.

Our committee is planning similar research for our profession. Armed with that research, a long-term strategy can be formulated.

So how can you help? Here are two ideas, and you may have others:

1. Many actuarial employers now have diversity programs. In these programs, diversity is defined in several dimensions, such as race, gender, disability status and sexual preference—the company may list 12–15 dimensions. One dimension that is very relevant to actuaries is thinking style, which acknowledges that thinking about problems from different approaches is a strength, not a weakness. Your company may have a chief diversity officer. Get acquainted with that person.

If your company or department has a diversity committee, attend their meetings and offer support and encouragement. At one meeting, we showed the movie "Crash." One attendee brought a box of tissues, and used them. Following the movie, we had a facilitated discussion.

If your company or department doesn't have a diversity committee, get one started. Whatever you can do to keep the conversation going will be welcome.

2. For hiring managers, make a conscious effort to find a diverse talent pool for your open positions. I am not promising that the pool will be large; but at least try. One of the tenets of diversity is that we are all prone to hiring "someone like me"—also called "unconscious bias." This is a natural tendency that must be resisted if we want more diversity. Any department, and any team within the department, probably needs multiple skill-sets and/or multiple thinking styles to fulfill its mission. Seek out prospects for the differences, not just the similarities that you can leverage to maximize the performance of your team.

There are so many dimensions to diversity that there will be no shortage of challenges in the future. Thanks to Errol Cramer, Craig Reynolds and others whose names you would probably not recognize, diversity now has a permanent place in the SOA. ■



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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://theactuarymagazine.org/building-an-inclusive-work-environment/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Missing Persons: Minorities in the Health Professions*, available at <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/media-relations/SullivanReport.pdf>.