WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE FOR ASSOCIATION DIVERSITY

A recent conversation on diversity, equity, and inclusion put a spotlight on the hard work associations are doing. The next step should address how leadership mirrors those ambitions.

Last week, leaders from 11 associations convened over Zoom to talk about the work that they’re doing on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). It’s a conversation that’s been stoked, of course, by the protests following the murder of George Floyd. And though most of the participants’ organizations have been doing this work for years, one theme that emerged from the 90-minute conversation, facilitated by Vista Cova’s Lowell Aplebaum, FASAE, CAE, is that there’s still more work to be done.

More to the point, it’s not the kind of work that an association leader can do alone. Richard Yep, FASAE, CAE, CEO of the American Counseling Association, noted that checking his ego at the door is essential to the DEI work his staff has undertaken.

“I think most of us realize that our job isn’t to have everybody take on our vision, but for us to cultivate what their vision is and how we mold that into something that makes sense for our members and for our staffs,” he said. “I have lots of ideas, but it really isn’t about me, it’s about those that I work with.”

Until we change leadership, this will not matter.

Those staff-wide commitments to diversity, and a willingness to consider new ideas, has borne fruit among the meeting’s participants. Organizations like the Illinois CPA Society, Society for Neuroscience, and International Association of Fire Chiefs have scholarship and mentoring programs for emerging professionals in their fields. (As does ASAE, which also participated in the event.) The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and Association Forum have created online resources for both staff and members alike to strengthen their sense of cultural awareness.

But one statement made during the event seemed to both tie together the efforts that were shared while also delivering a challenge to every association pursuing DEI in earnest. Rob Henry, vice president of education at the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, shared CASE’s experience with a leadership pipeline program
focused on supporting future senior-level professionals, which he prefaced by saying this: “Until we change leadership, this will not matter. I believe people are committed to diversity, but they are more committed to their cultures. And what we have to do is bring in more diverse leaders who will change the culture.”

If there is indeed still work to be done, especially in nonprofitdom, it’s there. One study suggests that representation of people of color on nonprofit boards and the CEO office is in the single digits; another shows that 27 percent of nonprofit boards are entirely white. According to a 2019 report from Nonprofit HR [PDF], nearly half of all nonprofits (42 percent) say their staffs are not reflective of the communities they serve.

As I wrote last week, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented an opportunity for organizations to rethink those dismal numbers as part of the larger strategic conversations that they’re under pressure to have now. The fact that nearly a dozen associations convened in an atmosphere of urgency to address DEI issues marks a meaningful shift in the industry: It moves the subject away from the periphery of the association world and closer to the center. But keeping it there—especially when it comes to critical improvements like creating more diverse boards—requires a lot of patience and intentionality. That the current moment may spark more direct and open conversations among staffs and members about where their efforts have fallen short is a good thing. The next and more meaningful step is to take what’s learned and build leadership pipelines that reflect the diversity that every organization is striving toward.

MARK ATHITAKIS
Mark Athitakis, a contributing editor for Associations Now, has written on nonprofits, the arts, and leadership for a variety of publications. He is a coauthor of The Dumbest Moments in Business History.