

WEF Promotes a Diversity Initiative to Its Members

By Tom Greci

Typical events expected at WEFTEC include a technical program of great proportion, Operations Challenge, an exhibition hall that is the envy of the industry and meetings and events that can boggle the mind. This year in New Orleans, WEFTEC 2018 was no exception.

Each year, in addition to the events mentioned above, WEF rolls out new programs and initiatives. Two of those initiatives presented this year include a make-over of the “Water’s Worth It” program and an initiative to promote diversity among WEF membership.

The *Water’s Worth It* program is similar to the one proposed back in 2008. It is now, as it was then, an effective reminder to members and the public of the importance that water plays in day-to-day life and the value that our industry plays in maintaining clean water. More will be heard on the re-branding of this initiative going into 2019.

WEF’s promotion of diversity is not necessarily a new initiative. Rather, the program is a dusting off and a renewed focus on one already incorporated by WEF. WEF had a Diversity and Inclusivity Policy that was established in October 1997. The general statement below reflects a more recent (May, 2015) revision of the Policy and states; *The Water Environment Federation is committed to enhancing diversity and awareness of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, disability and sexual orientation among its staff, consultants, contractors and members. As a matter of principle and practice, the Water Environment Federation values and seeks a diverse and inclusive membership. It is the Federation’s goal to encourage full participation in the activities of the Federation, its Member Associations and the affiliated entities by all individuals.*

More recently WEF modified its Strategic Plan to incorporate a goal to further state its endorsement of a diverse environment. The goal states:

Goal 1 – Develop an engaged membership that is representative of the multiple practice areas of the water environment industry.

1a.) – Increase diversity and inclusiveness in the water sector through engagement and membership growth.

1b.) – Partner with Member Associations for mutual organizational success.

Diversity is an important criterion for the success of any organization. As quoted by the U.S. Government’s Office of Personal Management, “America was founded on the ideal that from many, we are one, a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. That is the rationale for inclusion. To gain the maximum benefit from our increasingly diverse workforce, we must make every employee feel welcome and motivated to work their hardest and rise through the ranks. We must affirm that we work better together because of our differences, not despite them.” The sentiment of the U.S. Government’s Office of Personal Management goes back to the United

States Motto established in 1782, *E pluribus unum*, or out of many, one. Though the motto refers to the strength of our nation from the thirteen colonies, it recognizes the diversity of each colony. As such, the diversity of talent within an organization ultimately leads to a stronger organization.

Diversity has been highly profiled in recent years. For example, in 2011, Barak Obama declared *Executive Order 13583—Establishing a Coordinated Government-Wide Initiative to Promote Diversity and Inclusion in the Federal Workforce*. As a result of the President’s executive order, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management published their *Governmentwide Inclusive Diversity Strategic Plan*. The Plan provides general recommendations on attaining diversity goals for all government workers.

This year, the WEF House of Delegates (HOD) created a workgroup to further investigate ways to increase the diversity of WEF membership. The HOD workgroup, along with the WEF Membership Committee, will develop methods to draw more widespread demographics into the water profession. More on the progress of WEF’s diversity initiative will be reported as it develops.

How does this fall into the workings of the NJWEA? The topic is something for us all to consider. But, to discuss further, one has to determine what diversity means. The realm of diversity in a membership base should include members and potential members that reflect the social demographic of its service. Individual elements of consideration may include, but are not all inclusive of criteria such as: economic status, ethnicity and race, gender, disability, nationality, veteran, educational level, career/vocation, and other criteria as may apply. All, whether a majority or a minority in in the NJWEA should be established to best reflect the applicable demographic.



Two key terms of importance in moving forward are *membership diversity* and *inclusion*. We can define **membership diversity** as a collection of individual attributes from all demographics, as stated above, that together help the NJWEA pursue organizational objectives efficiently and effectively. We can define **inclusion** as an organizational

culture that encourages all members to feel valued for their unique qualities and experience which gives them a sense of belonging. Inclusive habits include being Fair, Open, Cooperative, Transparent, Supportive and Empowering. While this writer doesn’t feel one should force diversity for the sake of being diverse, one should promote, even force, inclusion. If one ensures a policy of inclusion to all, diversity will naturally follow.

In New Jersey, the NJWEA has generally tried to encourage inclusivity in the way the Association works with its members and recruitment of members. Though not necessarily a direct policy or affirmative action, the NJWEA has been relatively successful growing a diverse organization. A look at the attendees from a snapshot of the NJWEA Conference exhibit hall thirty years ago and today would show quite a different picture. But, with that all said, the Association can continue to improve its overall diversity.

This writer does not believe we necessarily need to develop a rigid practice of affirmative action. Rather, this writer feels the Association should continue to demonstrate open-door policies to any and all who are interested in making the waters of New Jersey environmentally clean and inherently safe. For its volunteers, the NJWEA mantra has always been, if you are willing to help, you will be put to work. That is the purest form of inclusion for its members and potential members. My advice to all is, to be fair, open, cooperative, transparent, supportive, and empowering whenever the situation is warranted. It generally doesn't hurt; and, you might be surprised at the positive response you receive. As stated above, there will be more to come on the topic in future issues.

Tom Greci is currently a NJWEA delegate serving on the WEF House of Delegates Membership Diversity and Structure Initiative Workgroup. He is also on the WEF Membership Committee.