

Anti-bias training widespread in R.I.

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LONGTIME TRAINER: Judy Kaye, owner of Providence-based Kaye Training & Consulting, has been working as a consultant with small and large employers, as well as individuals, on diversity and racial-bias training for 25 years. / PBN

PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO



Even before Starbucks closed its doors May 29 for an afternoon of mandatory racial-diversity training for all employees, many small-business owners and human resources managers at larger companies in Rhode Island recognized the need for anti-bias training.

The incident that precipitated the Starbucks action, which affected 8,000 stores and 175,000 employees, involved an employee calling police on two black men, who were waiting for a friend in one of the chain's Philadelphia stores.

The national furor over their treatment prompted a quick response from Starbucks executives that included the mandatory training day, as well as ongoing training for new hires and all employees, and a new policy that allows anyone to sit inside their restaurant without having to purchase an item.

In Rhode Island, many business owners took note of the Starbucks story. But for more than a year, as the treatment of blacks in the U.S. has become more prominent through movements such as Black Lives Matter, many companies have already been taking proactive steps to include anti-bias training in their hiring and internal education programs, according to consultants, executives and business-association leaders.

Dale Venturini, who is president and CEO of the Rhode Island Hospitality Association, said the association has been offering more harassment training programs, which educate participants on federal anti-discrimination laws, as well as best practices and creating a workplace free of harassment and discrimination.

She estimated about 360 people have been trained so far, through in-person sessions and web-based programs.

Judy Kaye, owner of Providence-based Kaye Training & Consulting, has been training corporate and business clients, and working with individuals, on unconscious-bias training for 25 years.

She's noticed more of an awareness of the issues surrounding harassment and discrimination in recent years. Her workshops and training include discussion about unconscious bias and stereotyping, as well as systemic bias or institutional bias, which affects particular groups of people.

Her clients have ranged from a fire chief having difficulty in hiring diverse recruits, to small businesses, startups that are expanding and larger companies, including a large Rhode Island health care system, which has both diverse workforces and customer bases.

An example of unconscious bias would be getting on an airplane and hearing a woman's voice over the communications system. The automatic association for many people, when they think of a pilot, is a white man, Kaye said.

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BOBBY RODRIGUEZ, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island vice president

"It is difficult to unlearn that. It is unconscious most of the time," she said. "And even if we become aware of it, we're not aware of how much it impacts the world in terms of opportunities and distribution of power." Over the past four years, the Black Lives Matter movement, and more recently the MeToo movement, may be leading more people to see that mistreatment is not a case of isolated individuals, she said, but of larger patterns that have grown out of longstanding stereotypes.

In terms of discrimination, managers absolutely need to be aware of race and gender and other differences that have historically been associated with exclusion, she said, including the LGBT community.

"One of the growing areas in the diversity field today is gender variance," she said. "We are seeing more and more people who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming or who are transitioning from one gender to another."

Much of her work is with law enforcement agencies, Kaye said. She advised the fire chief, who said it was difficult to recruit people of color, to expand his outreach within the -community.

Over generations, many of the first responders now working have thought of themselves as police officers or firefighters, because they knew people in their family and community who had those jobs.

"It's all about what you think is possible," she said. "You have to do your best to present people with exemplars and role models, so they think it's possible."

Among larger companies that have intensified their efforts to train employees and diversify their workforce is Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island.

Starting in 2012, the company started moving toward a comprehensive diversity and inclusion program. That included efforts to recruit and retain employees and provide ongoing training, not only for its 760 employees but for physicians who participate in its system.

Diversity and inclusion training was extended to all employees, from CEO Kim Keck to employees in the retail stores, said Bobby Rodriguez, a vice president and chief people officer who oversees human resources functions.

Physicians who accept Blue Cross insurance were able to participate as well, for credits in cultural competency education toward their continuing medical-education requirements.

The need for cultural awareness and sensitivity is great, given the diversity of Rhode Island and the expectations for medical-care professionals, he said.

"Everyone should understand that every human deserves to be treated with respect," said Rodriguez.

"What happened in Starbucks could happen to any of us. All it takes is one employee," he said. "The impact is huge."