

Promoting Equity through Employee Resource Groups

THE BENEFITS
ABOUND FOR
EMPLOYEE
MEMBERS, THE
WORKPLACE, AND
THE COMMUNITY
AT LARGE

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For decades, local governments have promoted employee resource groups (ERG) as a way to connect employees who share demographic factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, or other common backgrounds or interests. Employees have much to gain from participating in ERGs. Membership in these groups can spark innovation and a sense of belonging, and provide support and a platform to advocate for change.

In this time of renewed interest in equity and inclusion, it's important to understand how local governments and the communities they serve can benefit from them. With the non-white population expected to reach majority status by around 2044, leaders and employees of public agencies need to respond to the nation's growing diversity and ensure they look like the communities they serve. ERGs are poised to serve as catalysts for change in local government workplaces, and it's time for leaders to examine their relationships with them to ensure that everyone is benefitting from their potential.

ERGs began in another time of immense change, with Xerox launching the first group, for Black employees, in 1970. They spread within the private and public sectors and branched out to represent women, LGBTQ, and Latinx employees, among others. In some workplaces, ERGs are freestanding, not affiliated with chapters elsewhere. Others, such as our organization, Local Government Hispanic Network (LGHN), and the National Forum for Black Public Administrators, link employees in different public agencies to each other to share ideas, advocate

for inclusiveness, and advance leadership for local government employees of color.

In Phoenix, for example, the local LGHN chapter, Phoenix Hispanic Network, has partnered with the local NFBPA chapter to jointly adopt a family during the holidays. Members from both organizations get together to wrap gifts and deliver items, which provides members with joint community service and networking. The Phoenix-area ERGs also come together and host an annual ERG meet-and-greet where all city employees are welcome. Each ERG has an information table, and speakers reinforce the importance of ERGs to the mission of local government.

Benefits to Employees

For local government employees, these groups provide a long list of benefits that in turn help the organization, since fulfilled employees are essential to high-functioning workplaces. The best groups provide the following for their members:

Help new employees settle in. The first two to three months are critical for an employee's long-term performance and satisfaction, and members of traditionally underrepresented groups face particular challenges becoming acclimated to a new workplace. By involving appropriate ERGs in the onboarding process, local governments help them acclimate and begin to feel like valued members of the organization. This can help promote retention and improve performance.



Develop talent. Through professional development, networking, and mentoring, ERGs assist in finding and nurturing future leaders, which benefits both the employees and the organization. The LGHN Padrinos/Madrinas program draws on a tradition in Hispanic culture in which cherished adults serve as an extension of family and provide a strong support system for family members. The program creates a similar support system for emerging leaders in local government, pairing them with a seasoned coach who has expertise and knowledge in a variety of areas. Other talent development pathways include internal and external leadership development programs, coaching, and skill sharing. Ultimately the informal and formal talent development leads to more satisfied employees, reduced turnover rates, and a more diverse pool of leaders.

Be heard. Effective local government leaders listen to, ask questions of, and act on recommendations from their ERGs. This dialogue helps leaders to consider multiple perspectives on important issues and lets employees know their input is valuable. For employees to truly understand this, it's important that they see their contributions lead to action, or they may grow disillusioned if nothing ever emerges from their input.

Benefits to Employers

Many of the biggest benefits to employees extend to employers, too. Both the community and its leaders win when all local government workers feel valued, heard, and satisfied at work. ERGs extend the following benefits to local government organizations:

Promote diversity. The best organizations look and sound like the people they serve, and this is especially important in local government, where it is imperative for decisions to consider everyone. When stakeholders see employees who look and sound like them at community meetings and city hall, they are more likely to feel like they belong and solutions to problems are more likely to be representative of the community at large.

Gather feedback and increase trust. An individual employee might feel intimidated at the prospect of raising issues related to diversity to their managers. By making the time to meet with ERGs, and asking for honest feedback, managers are more likely to know how employees are really feeling and where opportunities for improvement lie. Are your employees empowered and feel empowered to bring their ideas to the table? Have you analyzed your policies and procedures through the lens of equity? Are managers held accountable to ensure equitable opportunities are prevalent in their departments? These are important questions to ask, and leaders are more likely to get direct answers from resource groups. Once they have the answers, it's vital to act on them; inaction leads to mistrust, which turns off the feedback spigot pretty quickly.

Find talent. In addition to nurturing future leaders, ERGs can be a big help with recruiting a diverse workforce. ERGs should be involved in getting the word out about new positions, inviting people to apply, and vetting applicants as appropriate. Many groups like LGHN offer job boards for member organizations to advertise for open positions. As a bonus, applicants are often impressed with

prospective employers who signal their commitment to diversity by involving resource groups in all stages of the recruitment process. ERGs can do the same for diverse contractors and suppliers, encouraging them to apply for contracts with the local government to ensure spending is equitable.

Opportunities Moving Forward

Perhaps your local government is doing everything outlined above. If so, great! But there is always room for improvement, especially in a time of great change like we are experiencing now. Ask yourself: Are we also doing the following? If not, why not? The following are suggestions of how you can further support ERGs in your organization:

Provide support. Most work in ERGs is led by volunteers, and tasks such as creating flyers, ordering food, and reserving rooms creates a burden that doesn't help build members' leadership skills. Providing administrative support alleviates some of the burden, thereby encouraging them to do what the organizations were created for. Encouraging middle managers and executive leaders to attend ERG events, engage with attendees, and champion the group's efforts sends a message of support and increases its effectiveness.

Compensate leaders. When ERGs were largely a support network, it made sense that they were volunteer-led. But with members now attending budget meetings, leading community forums, and providing other direct service while representing their group, it makes sense to consider compensation where

possible. It doesn't have to be a salary increase or a bonus; it could take the form of dedicating a set percentage or number of hours to resource group work.

Fund membership and conference attendance. Employees can develop their network, receive talent development, and reap other benefits from participating in conferences and belonging to national ERGs. For a small fee, it's another way to make employees feel valued and deepen their commitment to their work.

Encourage collaboration. An increasing number of public agencies are creating roles dedicated to diversity and inclusion. Those roles could potentially develop into rivals to ERGs, but smart leaders will ensure they work together in the pursuit of the greater good. Most resource groups understand that the aims of each individual group are similar—to promote equity—but that the overall organizational goal is supported by groups retaining their own identity even as they learn to work together.

When conceived and managed well, employee resource groups provide a long list of benefits to employee members, the workplace, and the community at large. Local government leaders can work with resource group leaders to identify opportunities to improve so that they are prepared to meet new challenges and assist in making workplaces and communities more representative and equitable. **PM**

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