

When It Comes to Diversity, Improvement Depends on Each of Us



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Years ago, when I was writing a freelance magazine profile of then-Congressman Harold Ford, Sr. (father of the current congressman), I was invited to attend a speech Ford was giving one Sunday morning at an African-Methodist-Episcopal church in his district in Memphis, Tenn. Ford, who is African-American, gave a spirited talk from the pulpit that gave me plenty of quotes for my article. But that is not what I remember most.

What stands out most vividly to this day is the feeling of being the lone white face in that large sanctuary. Those around me could not have been more warm or welcoming. While they treated me graciously, I still felt awkward. Yet I have often found myself in later years in rooms dominated by white males, and I have wondered if the lone woman or person of color felt the discomfort I experienced that Sunday morning. It is regrettable but true that while the communications profession has made strides in becoming more gender balanced, it's still a profession that does not reflect the society, or even the business world, that it serves.

The Arthur W. Page Society has confronted these issues, largely through the efforts of our Diversity Task Force, which was first formed in 2002. The task force has looked at diversity on several levels. We have confronted the need for greater diversity in our membership. While the Page Society includes many women in both its leadership ranks and general membership, it lacks racial diversity in both areas. In part this is a reflection of the

leadership ranks of the PR profession, from which the Society recruits new members. The Membership Committee of the Page Society board has made diversity one of its most critical objectives for future recruitment efforts. The task force has also worked on improving the diversity of speakers and panelists at Page Society meetings and conferences.

In January, the Page Society was part of the Public Relations Coalition's diversity summit that culminated in the release of "Focus on Diversity: Lowering the Barriers, Raising the Bar." (*See sidebar on Page 14 for more on the report.*) The Coalition is currently conducting the first survey of leaders in the profession to track progress in three critical areas: recruiting, mentoring and advocacy.

These efforts are well-intentioned and, over time, should help to attract a more diverse group into the profession. They will also help focus the leadership of the profession on the continuing need to hire and develop a diverse work force.

In the end, making meaningful and lasting improvements will depend on thousands of individual decisions made by leaders at every level in corporations, agencies and academia. Each of us must examine our own departments and companies and face the tough questions when making hiring, promotion and development decisions. Am I making diversity a priority when recruiting new talent? Am I looking for ways to widen the circle of candidates I am considering for promotion? Am I valuing the range of background, experience, critical thinking and innovation that comes from having a diverse work force?

If we answer these questions honestly and continue making improvements in our individual choices, we can enhance the prospects for a more diverse PR profession in the years to come. The need is obvious; the solution rests with each of us. ■