

Diversity Has Always Been Our Strength—On Racial Diversity, We Can Do Better—It Starts With Recognizing That Fact

By Carl Hyland, Vice President, Membership Development, CRN

As I watched the 2020 Democratic National Convention, a dedicated young climate activist introduced herself: “My name is Katherine Lorenzo. I am an Afro-Latina, and I’m a climate activist. Not a lot of climate activists look like me.” She described showing up at environmental activist events, and other activists frequently see her for the first time and ask, “What are you doing here?”

Their unspoken expectation was that climate activists are white. Rather than embracing a fellow advocate who shares their fears and aspirations, they allowed race to divide and separate them. I suspect some of her fellow activists did not ask that question with words, but with their looks.

As I consider the racial disparities in this industry, I wonder if we do the same: Do we in the natural health industry welcome diversity and foster inclusions, or unconsciously exude nonverbal cues about who is welcome? How do we explain the lack of racial diversity on display at events such as SupplySide West and in the 90,000 mass of humanity at Expo West (my beloved, professional Mecca)? Consider that more than 35 percent of U.S. college students are black or Hispanic. Any job candidates among them? By any standard, our industry could be much better attracting and employing black and Hispanic people, especially in our executive suites.

This industry is not unique in that respect. The reality is that gatherings of more educated adults can be super spreaders of discrimination with subtle anti-inclusion messages. According to Pew, personal experiences with racial discrimination are common for black Americans, but those who are college educated or male are more likely to say they’ve faced racial discrimination. Roughly eight in 10 black Americans with at least some college experience (81 percent) say they’ve experienced racial discrimination, including 17 percent who say this happens regularly. Another study by Pew Research found that in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) industries, 62 percent of African-Americans have reported experiencing discrimination in the workplace.

The natural health industry is inclusive in so many other respects, and always has been; a model in this regard for our polarized country. Unlike polarized America, those who call this industry home rarely care if your political color is deep red or dark blue. The far left and the far right share the aisles in our health food stores. Latter-day Saints, Menonites, Orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Christians all share our aspirations for better health and cleaner products. What we share is too powerful. Our cause is too important.

Imagine this experiment: magically switch the owner of any natural food store in America with any other. A conservative from Midland, TX and a progressive from Berkeley, CA. A corner supplement store in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and natural food store in Wichita, KS, Miami, FL and Juneau, AK or Santa Monica, CA and New Orleans, LA. They—and their customers—speak the same (higher) language of natural health, empowerment and helping one’s neighbor. How can I help you be more healthy?

So what is it about race that defies our unity? Maybe we have just never made it a priority. Maybe we just haven’t bothered to notice the lack of diversity in our board rooms, trade shows and senior staff conferences. Maybe we have just assumed that if there is no malice in our hearts, it couldn’t be discrimination. We would be wrong.

The existence of unconscious bias is a blind spot that is holding us back. If the natural health industry is really about better health for all, we need diverse voices and perspectives to reach that goal—voices at all levels of our companies.

We can do this; we can do better. (And I can do better.) We can make the natural

health industry more diverse, more equitable and more inclusive. We start with our shared vision of better health and look for what we have in common, rather than what we don’t. We can proactively recruit new faces to our companies and be more welcoming when they arrive. We can value those diverse experiences and assure there are pathways for advancement by acknowledging differences and celebrating the richness they bring to the conversation. We can provide the training and coaching that creates career paths.

It starts with acknowledging that this industry is not immune from inequities and committing to do better. We are in a strong position to “be the change” we want to see in the world. And it can start with the natural health industry.



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