

Spotlight on Diversity

Home Depot: Embracing the Rich Tapestry of Workplace Diversity

An interview with Joel Feuerman, HR Manager, Home Depot

Interviewed by: Andrea Todaro, Diversity Director, BNHRA



Home Depot won the “Outstanding Place to Work Award” at the Niagara Homecoming Business of the Year Awards - 2010

Andrea:

“You have an excellent reputation in many professional circles, from the work you do on the Niagara Workforce Investment Board, to your input and contributions as a member of the Diversity Committee for the Buffalo Niagara Human Resources Association and several other human services organizations. However, most importantly, you’ve served as Human Resources Manager for Home Depot and have a reputation for success in many areas - increasing retention, staff morale and community involvement, to name a few. I’m aware from our history together, that this is partly due to your ability to counsel a diverse range of individuals toward personal and professional growth from your extensive background in the human services. You often marry these talents with what you do in your role as Human Resources Manager for Home Depot. You’ve done a number of workshops in the community over the course of several years. What types of workshops do you do?”

Joel:

“Well, they all revolve around aspects of workforce readiness. I do workshops on conflict resolution, job search skills, managing a career and a family, and career growth strategies - such as, once you’ve gotten a career, where do you go with it? I discuss SMART goals with my program participants, so that we can track and observe change, develop concrete results. I’ve developed so many PowerPoint presentations throughout the years targeted toward different

audience groups...for special needs individuals from various cultures and backgrounds as well as the general population. It's truly one of my favorite things to do."

Andrea:

"What is your favorite form of community outreach that you're currently doing?"

Joel:

"One of my most enjoyable and rewarding endeavors this year is being very involved with Carolyn's House. I go out at least once each month to present a series of workshops on the topics I just mentioned, such as managing a career and family and conducting a successful job search. It went from me developing the classes, to my asking the participants, 'Ok, what would you like the classes to be about...what topics are you interested in?' I always like to get feedback and involve them in the creative process. It's been an exciting challenge for me, because I've ended up having to develop classes in areas I don't have a significant amount of life experience in and so, in turn, I've been able to learn. It's been interesting to gather information, observe and see what people do that makes work-life management work versus what doesn't work. The classes have been very well received and highly successful, producing tangible results. For example, I was working with a young lady who had a challenging background and I did some interview skills coaching with her, and when I came back, she'd gotten a job. So, that was really exciting!"

Andrea:

"Where else have you conducted job search and life management workshops?"

Joel:

"Lockport High School, Allentown Industries, Fellowship House, Innovative Placements, Iroquois Job Corps, and too many to mention over the years. Doing job search and life management workshops are truly one of my favorite things to do. Next, we're setting up our second one at Adult Career and Continuing Education Services- Vocational Rehabilitation (ACCES-VR). We'll be arranging it after the diversity job fair my company is participating in on October 30th. I'm very much looking forward to it and excited to explore what kind of material they'd like presented."

Andrea:

"So, let's talk about Home Depot and about how you've created a diverse work culture and what makes it particularly special."

Joel:

"I think that, first of all, when I left the not-for-profit world and I was looking at different companies, it was important for me to find a company that was 'value based' and that I could still do community activity in and be proud of. That's actually one the key reasons why I went to Home Depot. They have a true vision of being part of the community, taking care of their people, true life benefit programs that can improve the quality of life for everybody, and a strong, panoramic view of diversity and inclusion. They really do believe in this - it's not just something we do, it's truly a business imperative. If you're going to be part of the community and build that emotional connection, you really have to have people who represent the community there. Not only do they do that, they also bring diverse ideas, challenges, and opportunities for growth that

make people think more innovatively, developing better plans and thinking of alternative ways of doing things. And if you're a shopper, and you're going through our store, and it doesn't reflect who you are, or if there's a language barrier, then you're not going to go there...so that's also a compelling reason for developing a diverse workforce in the retail industry. So, it's both a business imperative AND the right thing to do. And, then what I always say is, if you have an inclusion philosophy and you are bringing diverse types of people in, you also have to embrace that culture. It's a great opportunity to learn more about different cultures – so we do some cross-cultural educational activities with our employees, which have been well-received and very successful. It makes a real difference I think...you can say 'Oh, that makes sense!' or 'Oh, that's why that is!' I think that sometimes we forget that very few people are natives to this country if you go back three to four generations... We really are a country of people who have come from someplace else and then we've all merged together into one culture. Although people may view diversity as a new thing...well, to me, it's not necessarily...it's actually something that's part of the fabric of our nation."

Andrea:

"I understand that your company focuses on several areas in diversity...if you could talk about a couple of them, that would be great."

Joel:

"Age is an important area of diversity that we observe in our workplace...and I'm fortunate enough to say that there are baby-boomers who say when they retire, 'I wanna get a job at Home Depot.' This is a key element in our workforce...They bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the table. And I think that the mistake that some companies make is that they look at that semi-retired person and say, 'Well, he's the retired, pt cashier or customer service agent,' assuming that part-time and an entry level position is what he or she wants. But, the reality is that this person can come to you with 24 years of interpersonal, management and computer skills and they might want another career at Home Depot. So, sometimes you might initially put someone into an entry-level job but they have 24 years of experience and they may also be management material. It's perfect...a win/win. Most of the time, what I've found is that when you've put a mature worker into that role, they will also serve as a mentor to beginning managers. So, you actually have someone in a peer group, who's going to teach them management skills. We also have a great coach program...because that first 30 days does a lot to determine our company's turn-over, we've found that mature workers make great coaches...maybe they no longer want to be a manager but make a great coach instead. Their work ethic, fascination, and professionalism are amazing....a great resource. It is important to remember that everyone brings a unique perspective that can truly benefit the business."

Andrea:

"So, let's explore ethnic representation at your store, another area of diversity. How have you been able to engage your Hispanic and other minority populations? What do you do as a company?"

Joel:

"We have one of the best retention rates in the market at my store. My Hispanic/Spanish-speaking retention rate year to date is 100%. Much of it lies in ensuring they are an integrated part of the group and valuing them."

One example of this is when we developed cross-cultural awareness through a gentleman of the Muslim faith who is on our management team. This guy is a wonderful employee and he's nicely and patiently sat through our Hanukkah day and other holidays for many years, yet we had never really done a Muslim holiday as a celebration for him or acknowledged his holiday. So, we actually did one at one of our staff meetings for him...I did some research on it, got special food, and announced the meeting that way. His eyes welled up...he told us the story of the holiday, how it originated and expressed his appreciation. For years, he sat through our holidays and we hadn't celebrated his. It was wonderful and a win/win, a real growth opportunity for everyone.

We also recently celebrated "Hispanic Awareness Day" and involved a new employee who had only been with us for two months. I ended up unfortunately having a health emergency and was on sick leave for a little while. So, although I still set up time to discuss it with her, this new employee essentially ran the event herself...she made flan, set up a laptop and did all these amazing things to make the event something really special. My district HR came out, took pics, gave her an award, (she's still with us) and recognized her. So, just by engaging her and her having that initiative and drive, the event was incredible. What we try to do as a company is focus on engagement and involvement of our entry-level workers, help them to be part of our company in a significant way, so that they feel as if they're contributing to the big picture."

Andrea:

"Let's talk about some more of the benefits from working at Home Depot...I know that you have a really generous, altruistic culture."

Joel:

"Home Depot is all about 'growing' people, showing mutual respect and 'If you take care of our people, they'll take care of you.' I've heard employers ask, 'Where is the loyalty from our employees? It isn't the way it used to be.' Well, the question might be, 'Are we treating our employees the same as we did when we had that loyalty?'" Home Depot is highly committed to developing a strong reciprocal relationship with our associates by making them feel valued and taken-care of. We have a 401K program, even for part-timers, a discount program for things from restaurants to discounts at online universities, tuition reimbursement for full-timers, , a back-up dependent daycare program, and many other benefits – so you look at all those things we're doing for our associates and in turn, they do a lot for us.

For example, the leaders of our entire company decided to not give the executive management of our company a raise during the 4th quarter of the recession so that we could give a raise to hourly employees. Another great example is that the company looked at our hourly bonus plan at that time. A statement was issued saying that the company had not anticipated the economic conditions of the fourth quarter. At this time I was honestly expecting the company to announce that they were foregoing the bonus plan for this year. Instead Home Depot actually lowered the criteria to bonus based upon economic conditions.

Another example of our core values as a company is that when Hurricane Katrina hit, we had to find every single employee who worked for us – contact and make sure they were safe. Every employee in the impacted got a \$1000 grant with the opportunity to apply for a \$5000 grant. If they were full-time, they got full pay; part-time, they got 20 hours a week. Associates could relocate to anywhere they wanted in the country and the company would take them on; it didn't matter where each store was when it came to staffing. There was a district manager who was able to find every person in his store except for one part-time associate. It was not the safest of

times and people were walking around the street with guns. Nevertheless, he got the person's address, got in his car and drove out to the employee's house to make sure they were okay...

I had a person whose house burned down on Thanksgiving...he escaped with his family and was staying in a hotel. Home Depot gave him a home refund grant as well as money to move into an apartment. Our associates got together and drove out to his house, managers marked down jackets, employees raised 1000s of dollars, the company matched that, we had people donate household items, appliances, and kitchenware. Employees even went to another store. and bought clothes for the family. Also, I remember one year, when I first started with the company, an employee got up and thanked everyone during a staff meeting, because her car had died in November and not once had she walked home from November to April. Her co-workers had given her a ride to and from work every day for months. That wasn't management driven...but just part of our culture, embedded into our core values and philosophy.

Home Depot has a level of community outreach, diversity awareness and altruism that just doesn't exist in every culture. And that's why I think we're so strong...a large part of our culture is focused on diversity and inclusion...inclusion for everybody...because everybody's diverse in their own way."



Home Depot was also the "Buffalo Urban League Employer of the Year" - 2006