

# GLOBAL BRIDGEBUILDERS CASE STUDY

CITY OF DALLAS, TEXAS



## THE PRESENTING ISSUE

In 2007, one of the departments of the City of Dallas was dealing with assertions of ethnic bias, with accompanying fears of litigation. Some employees had the impression that the director of the department and her subordinates were only providing advancement opportunities to employees of like ethnicity. Naturally, this caused resentment and low-grade conflict. Though the work kept getting done, it was in spite of the employees' relationship with management, not because of it.

Departmental leaders asked Global Bridgebuilders to come in and conduct initial focus groups. They wanted GBB to find out what was actually happening in the rank and file. With the work environment getting more and more tense, they knew they needed outside help to see clearly and act wisely.

This was an ideal project for Global Bridgebuilders, which specializes in designing profitable workforce communities. GBB's role is to be a catalyst and coach to help organizations attain and sustain higher levels of performance. To this end, Skot Welch held an initial meeting and listened attentively to the department director and assistant directors. Global Bridgebuilders then advised the executive management to deploy the five-step process.



## THE FIVE-STEP PROCESS

The five-step process includes consulting with an organization, focusing on innovative outcomes, and implementing them by leveraging various dimensions of diversity. Everyone in the organization is involved, and everyone's commitment and intentionality are required to make the process work. The three phases generally take thirty-six months to complete, and benefits include more engaged employees, increased idea and solution flow within the organization, and a quantifiable



### PHASE I: ANALYZE AND EXPLAIN

1. Inclusion Systems Assessment (iSA): 3 weeks
2. Focus groups: 2 weeks
3. Strategic gap analysis report: 1 week

### PHASE II: ALIGN AND EQUIP

4. Employee Advisory Councils (EACs) and a professional development curriculum: 2 weeks of training, ongoing meetings of the EACs

### PHASE III: APPLY AND ENGAGE

5. Followup iSA: 18-24 months after the initial iSA



framework for measuring the impact of diversity and inclusion.

## PHASE I: ANALYZE AND EXPLAIN

We set up a deployment date for step one, which asks the question, *What sustainable diversity management processes are in place?* We answer this question with the first iSA, which gathers quantitative data about the status of the organization. The iSA contains sixty-four questions in five different categories: leadership, communication, organizational development, external relationships, and process improvement/systems criteria. Everyone in the department took the assessment. (When logistics get in the way of conducting the iSA, we instead use our online Climate Bridge Survey, the only assessment in the marketplace to combine the discipline of Diversity and Inclusion (D & I) and the proven framework of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.)

We then moved on to step two, which asks the question, *How do people feel about their department/division specifically, and about the organization in general?* We find this out by conducting focus groups. These typically involve all or a majority of stakeholders sitting down for a strategic dialogue that unearths qualitative data about the organization.

Step three asks these two questions: *What key themes emerged from the earlier steps, and how do we implement sustainable change? What learning gaps exist after a thorough quantitative and qualitative analysis?* Answering these question means taking the quantitative data from the iSA and the qualitative data from the focus groups and producing a strategic gap analysis report for the department. This report provides a quantifiable and directional road map for the implementation of a process-driven diversity and inclusion initiative.



## FINDINGS AND FEEDBACK

Our discovery process (steps one through three) revealed that while favoritism played a role, extremely low morale throughout the department was the real issue. The department had a highly toxic work environment, one which focussed on getting the work done but not on taking care of employees. It had gotten to the point where employees did not want to speak up because they did not think it would change anything. Employees had the solutions, but no one in leadership was paying attention to them. They were not being given a forum in which to provide ideas and make their voices heard. They were given no opportunities to take ownership or grow. There was no employee acknowledgment or reward structure. All of this was cumulatively misperceived as bias. These problems had been ignored for a long time, allowing them to fester beneath the surface. Employees were misperceiving this undesirable situation and reacting to the wrong narrative. The administration was not paying attention to the employees' perceptions, reacted poorly when they did notice that something was wrong, and were not being proactive about improving their workplace environment.

We worked with the department for over three months and were able to provide them with actionable feedback. However, the leadership's willingness to implement solutions was limited. They thought the department needed diversity training to address the perceived ethnic bias, but the issue went deeper than that. Employees were cautiously optimistic about Global Bridgebuilders' work at first, but management's indifference meant we were not able to complete the five-step process. This incomplete solution only drove morale lower, as employees still felt they were not being listened to. Faced with resistance from management, we decided to give it some time.



## FURTHER WORK WITH OTHER DEPARTMENTS

Global Bridgebuilders' work with this initial department proved to be a gateway to further service to the City of Dallas. Word got out in the directors' meetings, and later in 2007 we were contacted by the Department of Water Utilities, whose leaders understood the value of our unique process and wanted to get started right away. This was the beginning of our ongoing work with the City's various departments. The nature of the work done by each department varied widely, so each had issues and opportunities that were specific to their industry. On the other hand, all had low morale, poor communication, a lack of employee engagement, and little to no skills development. These, rather than ethnic bias, were always the most pronounced issues. Bias was an easy explanation for a more fundamental problem: employees and managers were tuned into different frequencies, unable to communicate with each other and resolve issues. It was this underlying problem that Global Bridgebuilders addressed.



## PHASE II: ALIGN AND EQUIP

Our five-step process remained consistent across all the departments, but step four, the creation of Employee Advisory Councils (EACs) and implementation of a professional development curriculum, was highly customized. In the words of Mary Suhm, former City Manager of Dallas, "The EAC brings together all levels of the department, meeting on a regular basis to identify problems and seek resolutions jointly. The structure facilitates problem solving, improved interactions between management and frontline employees, and in doing so removes not only the barriers to accomplishing organizational goals but those to achieving harmony within a diverse workplace." This egalitarian council creates and works through Top Ten lists of desired outcomes, replacing each list with a new one as they are completed. By doing so they listen to everyone's ideas, foster employee engagement, get results, and ultimately boost morale. In addition, Global Bridgebuilders' professional development curricula are custom-built for each organization to suit the unique needs of all their employees.



## PHASE III: APPLY AND ENGAGE

Step five, the second deployment of the iSA, followed implementation of the curriculum and the EACs. We typically deploy the iSA every eighteen to twenty-four months, allowing the organization to see quantitative data about the progress they have made. City of Dallas departments were encouraged by their progress, and they were able to set attainable goals for the future. These included addressing low employee morale, improving employee engagement, and streamlining communication. Our work with Dallas has now stretched over seven years, with at least four more years to go. Through the deployment of our five-step process, especially the EACs, morale has increased, communication has improved, and collaborative employee engagement has become the rule instead of the exception. Employees have very much appreciated that we take the time to truly listen to them. For example, the Department of Street Services had needed new uniforms for a while, but management was not listening to the employees. After we implemented an EAC, this need was identified and quickly fulfilled, boosting morale immensely—all because communication channels had been opened.

## REENGAGING THE ORIGINAL DEPARTMENT



In 2013, we were able to pick back up our work with the original department. Our success with other city departments had earned their leadership's trust, and they wanted to complete our five-step process. Their EAC is now very engaged and has completed its first Top Ten list, which included changing hiring practices, obtaining new equipment, and instituting new career tracks. The department developed momentum and has proved the cynics wrong, and this was evidenced in step five, the second deployment of the iSA. Like other

City of Dallas departments, this department continues to improve.

## BIG IDEAS



Our work in Dallas illustrates the ideas that all organizations must understand and implement in order to achieve effectiveness and inclusion, and ultimately to better serve their employees and citizens.

- **IDEAS** are the currency of the twenty-first century. Employee input and engagement are essential if an organization is to thrive. Employees must collaborate from top to bottom, and ideas must flow both ways. They expect fairness, to be seen and heard, and to be able to take part in work that is meaningful, and management must meet these expectations.



- **PEOPLE** make ideas work. Administrators expect employees to perform, but they often forget that they are people. Many conflicts will be resolved if this attitude can be turned around.



- We must tune in to the same **FREQUENCY** to communicate. Various “tribes” talk past each other because they forget that each is made up of human beings. They make the mistake of thinking that they must agree on everything to associate with each other. It is as if they are tuned in to different frequencies on a radio, unable to really hear each other. We must empower all employees to tune in to a common “human frequency,” a space where we can all meet, communicate, and solve problems. We must create a space where everyone has a voice, a table that is big enough for everyone to have a chair.



- We should focus on the **OUTCOMES** of diversity, not diversity for its own sake. Fear of lawsuits and recognition that it is the right thing to do go only so far as motivators for embracing diversity. A better motivator exists: diverse organizations can and should be more effective organizations. We must cease to simply focus on the diverse “beautiful room” without pushing for its potential outcome—innovation and business success.



- The twenty-first-century marketplace is **CONSUMER-CENTRIC**. Based on their past experiences, citizens tend to expect below-average performance and mediocre customer service from government organizations. Employees know that friendly and excellent service is expected, and they want to do a good job, but they are not being allowed to do so. Thus, expectations go unmet and disappointment continually results. To improve this situation, we must empower employees through listening, collaborating, and allowing them to engage

in the creation of the workplace that they desire for themselves and for generations to come.

## THE RESULTS



Mary Suhm, the former City Manager of Dallas, praised our work in her city: “Global Bridgebuilders has made a significant difference in the City of Dallas operations. Originally hired to address difficulties in the workplace around racial conflict, Skot Welch has brought to the issues practical, participative solutions which have had much broader ranges of success than originally envisioned. The Employee Advisory Councils which he has initiated and guided within several departments have become a critical component of our management structure.”

The original department we worked with, like other Dallas departments, implemented the critical ideas to great effect. Ethics trainers have even noticed a major difference between city departments that had established EACs and those that had not. By improving communication between employees and management, Dallas departments freed up the flow of vital ideas. They learned to resolve conflicts by tuning in to a common frequency. While before they recognized that they had diversity in ethnicity, age, and gender, they had not realized how to capitalize on it. Global Bridgebuilders showed the departments how diversity can be harnessed for innovation, and now they have embraced diversity aimed at improving business outcomes. Both internal and external stakeholders, including the citizens the departments serve, have benefited from this transformation.