

**Written Testimony before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress  
United States House of Representatives**

**“Cultivating Diversity and Improving Retention Among Congressional Staff”  
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Chair Kilmer, Vice Chair Graves, and members of the Select Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

An essential characteristic of the United States is its diversity of people, ideas, backgrounds, demographics and beliefs. What is not necessarily a feature of that diversity is full inclusion of diverse individuals, particularly as reflected in this case by Congressional Staff. Historically certain groups have been over represented in positions of power, influence, economic benefits, jobs and others have been under represented. This pattern is seen in Congressional staff offices.

Many corporations have embraced the concepts of diversity and inclusion and have developed practices to enhance their recruitment and retention of historically out of power individuals. Governments and parliaments globally have acted upon the need to ensure representation with many adopting affirmative mechanisms as vehicles to overcome homogeneity, closed social networks and in group favoritism. Many heads of state and government have appointed gender balanced cabinets for example and many parliaments have a critical mass of women as representatives (usually considered at 30-40%).

The U.S. Congress could learn from business and other countries as the government has a duty to include a wide range of perspectives to ensure the highest and best policies, innovation and creativity. This diversity lens can be looked at through those who are elected and those who provide staff roles for elected officials.

Diversity is not just about numbers although knowing the numbers is crucial to monitor progress. There is a tendency to look at race and gender which are major forms of diversity but there are others like socioeconomics, disability, sexual orientation/identity, age, language, neurodiversity, and educational backgrounds. Many organizations still look at the issue as one of “Noah’s Ark”—let’s just get two of each in the ark. The problem is that we all have unconscious beliefs about who others are. Thus, the giraffe looks at the zebra in the Ark and

thinks, “that animal is really funny looking with its short neck, silly black and white stripe and messy eating habits”.

A common challenge is that as humans we often gravitate to people who are ‘like’ us. This can play out with staffers recommending their friends and colleagues for congressional staff positions. The pool of applicants then seems to look like the group already hired. The challenge often is to widen the pool, reaching out to different schools, associations, ensuring that recruiting teams use some sort of Rooney Rule or Mansfield Rule (requiring at least one or more candidates who are from the nondominant groups). If interns are not paid, or paid minimally, only the well off can afford to undertake the positions.

Successful companies use best practices including:

- Diversity and inclusion are part of the culture and a highest priority for senior leadership. They monitor and measure progress at all levels of the organization and insist on understanding the dynamics of hiring, promoting and retaining those who work for them. Do a diversity audit.
- They know what skills the team needs and then use newly developed people analytics to ensure that job postings are ‘neutral’ in their wording. They avoid job description terms that will discourage certain groups from applying for jobs. (Looking for a ninja or all-star quarter back may have a chilling effect for some)
- Understand there are unconscious beliefs, perceptions, arch types, associations, and biases that play into whom we hire and how we evaluate others. For example, research shows that a person with a ‘non-Anglo’ name must send out 50% more resumes than someone with an Anglo name to get the same response. The exact same resume with a woman’s name versus a man’s name will get a different evaluation and response. Be aware that aggressive is defined differently when applied to nondominant group members than for dominant group members
- Talent comes in less likely places than perhaps thought of. Historically black colleges, women who have off ramped in their career and now want to on ramp back, community colleges are overlooked
- Interviews should be consistent, asking the same questions to all and with a diverse set of interviewers to avoid confirmation bias
- Understand how people have lived their lives and what that insight might provide. Did a candidate come from a wealthy family, go to an elite school, have tutors, get to tour Europe or did they have to work at the McDonald’s to pay for school and help their family and be the first to graduate college? Each brings a different view to the world, perhaps reflecting on grit, perseverance, resilience as valuable traits for a staffer.
- Use and demand facts, data and metrics. What is the gender gap in pay, if it exists for Congressional staffers? How and where does the office seek resumes and candidates? Is there a central database to help post jobs? What do the retention numbers tell you

about the trajectory of people's careers? What can an employee survey tell you about unconscious biases?

- There may not be a quota system in place but act 'as if' there was one

Diversity and inclusion signal many things including a desire to embrace America, to avoid dangers of homogeneity (group think), reflect a moral belief in equality, show that representatives can be trusted to actually represent, be more accountable to constituents, seek to encourage creativity and innovation and be effective in policy making.

If those are the missions and goals, diversity and inclusion are a necessity.

Again, thank you for the opportunity and I look forward to answering any questions you might have.