

A Culture of Inclusion

An Interview with Tracey Gray-Walker,
Chief Diversity Officer, AXA Equitable Life Insurance Company



Tracey Gray-Walker

EDITORS' NOTE Tracey Gray-Walker assumed her current post in March 2008 after having held the position of Vice President of Business Development and Opportunities. In 1989, Gray-Walker left Touche Ross & Company, to join AXA Equitable's Financial Management Associate Training Program. Since then, she has been a financial manager of the Northeastern Region of Retail Distribution; Project Manager for the development of the company's Workstation, which is a client-relationship management tool; and Assistant Vice President of Customer Marketing and Lead Generation. Gray-Walker earned a bachelor's degree in accounting from Fairleigh Dickinson University. She is a member of the Executive Leadership Council, a trustee of the Board for The New Jersey Center for Outreach and Services in the Autistic Community, and a member of AXA Equitable's Diversity and Inclusion Council.

COMPANY BRIEF In business since 1859, AXA Equitable Life Insurance Company (www.axa-equitable.com) is a leading financial protection company and one of the nation's premier providers of life insurance, annuity, and investment products and services. AXA Equitable, a subsidiary of AXA Financial, Inc., is part of the France-based AXA Group, a worldwide leader in financial protection strategies and wealth management, which has operations in 50 countries and has approximately \$1.73 trillion worth of assets under management.

Can you give a brief overview of AXA Equitable's integrated diversity strategy?

AXA is committed to diversity and inclusion. Our goal is to build an organization and local branches that are reflective of the local communities that we serve and to leverage the talents of all of our people through a culture of inclusion. Our key driver is to make sure that as a financial institution aspiring to provide excellence in each and every client experience, we take into account changing demographics while sustaining a culture of inclusion.

Some say inclusion is the progression of diversity. How do you define these terms?

I think that many times when you look at diversity, you really see color, gender, age, sexual preference, and so forth. With inclusion, you look at all the ways people are different and how to ensure that they want to, and are able to, fully participate in all aspects of our business. So I can see the point that diversity is the beginning and inclusion is the culmination.

Maximizing the talents of everyone, every day is really the goal. But how do you put metrics in place for this?

From a company standpoint, metrics are key to everything we do. Our CEO is very metric driven, so that leads the direction. The basic way to look at it is to look at numbers, but that's not the only way. We also look at employee engagement, morale, retention, and satisfaction levels.

How do you go about attracting talent?

First of all, you have to have multiple tentacles operating simultaneously. For example, we participate in career fairs at the historically black colleges and other select colleges. We also reach out to organizations like the National Association of Black Accountants, the National Black MBA Association, the National Society of Hispanic MBAs, and the Association of Latino Professionals in Finance and Accounting, just to name a few. We are also working with Asian organizations. We are absolutely looking strategically at partnering with those organizations while also trying to be very direct and calculated with regard to those that we actually enter into partnerships with.

Over the past two years, we have heard of young talent going to hedge funds and private equity. Do you find young people today have a good understanding of what a company like AXA offers?

We have the opportunity to change that thinking. My own experience here highlights

how a focus on engagement, mobility, and diversity encourages the retention of talent. Embracing and engaging professionals and customers of all backgrounds is not just the right thing to do but the smart thing to do in order to remain a preferred company where talented people build a career.

You were with the company in another position. When this opportunity came up, did you know it was the right fit?

No, I did not know it was the right fit for me. I'm a businessperson. I've been in business my entire career. I had never thought of joining HR. It was positioned in such a way that it built on what I had done in my previous job. It's a huge opportunity, and I'm always up for a challenge. It doesn't come without a lot of angst and a lot of work, but I'm really excited about it. I think it's going to be a great move for AXA Equitable and a great move for me.

There are so many elements to your role. Is it challenging to prioritize? When you look a year or two out, what are your key areas of focus?

I think the key is to quickly identify the first couple of things that I'm going to try to achieve and to set a short-term strategy and a long-term strategy. At AXA, we have an initiative that we call Ambition 2012, which is a global goal set by Henri de Castries, CEO of AXA Group, to be the preferred company in the industry for our customers, our shareholders, and our employees. There are tangible measurements around this – to double revenue and triple profits. In addition, Ambition 2012 will also be measured by how the company arrived there – through employee engagement and customer centricity. I'm creating a diversity and inclusion Ambition 2012 strategy with the senior leadership of the company. We will determine what we want to accomplish in 2008 and 2009 that supports the plan that will help us become the preferred company by 2012.

Have you been able to find the work/life balance?

To be honest, I don't do a great job of work/life balance. It's not because of the company; it's because of me. I have high expectations, and I do give a lot of time to the people who work for me. I have an open-door policy. So I come in early to get my work done, and I stay late, but that's by choice, because it's more important for me to ensure that my team is successful than it is for me to run home. ●