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Making diversity matter: Focus on uniqueness builds relationships at West Bend Mutual Insurance

Natraj Pathuri takes pride in working for a company where he can share the language, traditions and culture of his homeland of India with his fellow co-workers without feeling intimidated.

A native of Hyderabad, India, Pathuri is an information technology professional at West Bend Mutual Insurance Co., a place where he has found understanding and respect for his cultural uniqueness. Last month, Pathuri and other co-workers from India shared Indian cuisine, artwork, cultural dances and songs as part of the company's monthly diversity celebration.

"In India, we have so many dialects and languages and many different ways of dress. Here, different employees from different parts of India can wear their dress," said Pathuri, 34, who has been employed at West Bend since 2004. "We can hold our heads up and say we work for a company that gives us an opportunity to present our culture."

The insurance company's efforts in creating a culture that promotes and celebrates diversity have not gone unnoticed. West Bend Mutual was named in 2010 the nation's top place to work in the insurance industry in the large property/casualty insurer category sponsored by Business Insurance Magazine.

The company operates under the philosophy that it's important to celebrate cultural differences in the workplace and that doing so helps to break down barriers and improve productivity, which helps the bottom line, said Deb Cahoon, an assistant vice president for West Bend Mutual.

"We believe effective diverse relationships are critical for business success," Cahoon said. "We value the importance of people being unique. We want to make sure that everyone understands that it's OK to be different. Before you can go out and recruit, you have to make your environment welcoming to everyone."

Cahoon admits that the top place to work recognition was a bit of a surprise for a company located in West Bend and hopes it will go a long way in changing the perception that the far northern community is not a welcoming place for minority workers.

"We were very excited to win this award. You wouldn't expect it up here in West Bend," she said. "That's why it's important to have programs to help people understand why diversity matters."

Cahoon admits that the company has struggled to recruit diverse talent. Minorities comprise less than 10 percent of the work force at West Bend Mutual. The company has fared much better with women who make up more than half of the work force, a common trend in the insurance industry.

"Being in a small community, it's more difficult to get minorities to come here. We want to change the perceptions that are out there," Cahoon said.

Even as West Bend Mutual Insurance struggles to make inroads in recruiting diverse talent, winning recognition as a top place to work in its industry is an important distinction, especially in lean times when many companies have scaled back their diversity initiatives, said Belle Rose Ragins, a professor of management in the Sheldon B. Lubar School of Business at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

"It's not the award itself that's important. It's what the award represents in terms of a long-term effort," said Ragins, who specializes in diversity and gender issues in organizations.

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“When you care about diversity, you tend to value all of your employees,” she said. “Even though the economy is stumbling along, when things improve, the companies that do best at diversity are going to keep their talent. Companies that cut corners and say we can’t afford diversity initiatives are going to lose talent.”

A key factor that helped West Bend Mutual Insurance to win a top honor was the responses of its employees to a 76-question employee engagement and satisfaction survey, which was used to evaluate employees’ workplace experience and the company culture.

West Bend associates say they like being part of a company that values diversity and focuses on community and environmental issues. The company supports dozens of nonprofit organizations, including Habitat for Humanity, United Way and the MACC Fund (Midwest Athletes Against Childhood Cancer).

In addition, the company offers its 1,000-plus associates such amenities as an onsite bank, dry cleaning service, a 7,000-square-foot fitness center, three miles of walking trails, wellness programs, a new-hire mentor program and continuing education courses.

Among the company’s diversity initiatives are monthly events that celebrate different cultures. The program was launched in 2009 by West Bend’s Diversity Committee. This month’s event highlighted Italian culture and featured local band Sicilian Serenaders along with Italian treats from Sciortino’s Bakery in Milwaukee. Each month, cultural examples and artifacts belonging to different ethnic groups are placed on display at a diversity table located in the company cafeteria.

Experts say such measures can go a long way in fostering cultural sensitivity and bridging differences in the workplace.

Cammie Rosenthal, 40, an event coordinator for West Bend Mutual Insurance, said she had limited exposure to people of different cultures while growing up in the West Bend area. She now appreciates the chance to learn and understand other cultures on the job.

“It lets me know people on a different level. I like to know who they are, where they came from and what they believe,” said Rosenthal. “It’s made me more open to asking people about their cultures and why they do certain things. It’s the vehicle to open up those conversations.”