

January Diversity Tip Sheet: A Day On, Not a Day Off

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Each month, ALA's Diversity and Inclusion Committee focuses on a specific event or initiative for that month in order to help administrators and other professionals recognize and embrace the diversity within our offices. Of course, in January, we recognize Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day ("MLK Day"). Legislation was signed in 1983 creating a federal holiday to mark Dr. King's birthday.

For 2015, January 19 will mark Dr. Martin Luther King Day and many firms and organizations will be closed. Most likely, it is not necessary to provide a history lesson for your employees because hopefully, they fully understand the significance of Dr. King's contributions to our world. Instead, consider focusing on encouraging your employees to view this office holiday as a means to honor Dr. King's legacy through service.

In 1994, Congress designated the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. federal holiday as a national day of service. Taking place each year on the third Monday in January, the MLK Day of Service is the only federal holiday observed as a national day of service – a "day on, not a day off."

The MLK Day of Service has become a national movement that can empower individuals, strengthen communities, bridge barriers, create solutions to social problems, and move us closer to Dr. King's vision of a united community. Through employee volunteerism, a company has the opportunity to improve the morale of its employees, build team spirit in the organization and improve its ability to attract and keep high-quality employees. In short, volunteerism is a great way to help foster an environment of inclusion in your workplace. On this day, Americans of every age and background celebrate Dr. King through service projects.

There are many ways that companies can become involved in the MLK National Day of Service. A simple Internet search will produce numerous results for volunteer opportunities within your city or community. Also, while ideally, the volunteer work will be done on January 19th, organizations recognize that many individuals will have childcare and other issues that may prevent them from participating on MLK Day so organizations are welcoming volunteers during the weeks surrounding MLK Day.

There are also ample opportunities for you to start small and build on your activities each year. Consider hosting a game day at a nursing home for seniors or Veterans, offer to paint a classroom in an inner-city school, read to the blind and other disabled individuals. Ask your employees for suggestions because many may be personally involved in organizations that provide service to the community. One specific Internet search brought me to the "Points of Light" Website (www.pointsoflight.org). Here, it is suggested that organizations join the movement to host a "Sunday Supper." Inspired by Dr. King's vision of people of diverse backgrounds interacting on personal levels, America's Sunday Supper encourages people to share a meal and discuss issues that affect their communities, to increase racial and cultural understanding. Points of Light provides toolkits, films, conversation starters and incentives to help individuals and groups organize Sunday Suppers and service projects. Perhaps, consider hosting a Sunday Supper luncheon in the office and ask employees to bring in food donations for a local food bank.

What matters most is that you provide an activity or activities that allows all of your employees to participate if they choose. For example, providing free legal counseling to battered women will only involve your legal professionals but working together to assemble emergency toiletry kits for a battered women's shelter will provide opportunities for every one who would like to participate.

Consider forming a committee of employees that includes employees from all levels and ask the committee to select the activity. Also, you can ask for suggestions and randomly select the activity. What matters here is that you start the effort and include all employees so each will feel like a part of the team. Once your event is selected, seek volunteers to help with the project. If you are just starting on an initiative, interest levels may be low but over time, as word spreads, hopefully, more employees will want to become involved.

It does not matter how your firm or organization decides to get involved. What matters is that you plan something to show your employees that your company recognizes Dr. King's teachings of the importance of community service to help empower and strengthen local communities. You can provide tools and resources for individuals to become engaged in service activities to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on this federal holiday. Dr. King committed his life to service and to ensuring that all people are treated with respect and fairness. Take some time to show your employees that you honor his dreams and it will result in a win-win situation for your employees, your company and the community.

Resources:

MLK Day of Service <http://mlkday.gov/>

Points of Light www.pointsoflight.org