



U.S. mid-term election and recent media missteps reveal multicultural achilles heel

THE RECENT MID-TERM election cycle came to an end amid news headlines that included Germany's Prime Minister Merkel declaring that multiculturalism has failed in the U.S. Senate candidate Sharron Angle telling Hispanic students "you look a little more Asian to me", and National Public Radio (NPR) Chief Executive Vivian Schiller suggesting that fired analyst Juan Williams keep his feelings about Muslims to himself. The results of the election and what they will ultimately mean for people who care about diversity and inclusion is unclear. What is not in question however, is that political and business leaders need coaching on dealing with cross-cultural communication especially in the media.

A Need for cultural competency

Each of the above named leaders could have handled the media much better if they understood how their comments would be received by multicultural audiences. Prime Minister Merkel has to know that saying "multiculturalism has failed" will make news headlines that place Germany and its leadership in an unfavourable light. It sends the message that immigrants must assimilate or stay home.

Sharron Angle's comments to Hispanic students were interpreted by Latino leaders as insensitive and uncaring. Ethnic media asked if she would make that kind of statement to a group of White or Asian students. Her cultural incompetence may have cost her the election. NPR Chief Executive Vivian Schiller's comments were seen by African-American media and the African-American community in general, as a character assassination. Blacks feel strongly that Schiller was suggesting that Williams was unstable.

In each of these examples, the leader in question demonstrated a lack of cultural understanding or cultural competency. In a world where news travels at the speed of light, cultural missteps can damage or end careers. Leaders in this multicultural world are going to have to learn much

more about where culture connects or divides people. Business leaders, especially in the hospitality industry with its diverse workforce, are going to have to be fluent in multiple cultures in order to succeed.

Election results set back for diversity

During the first two years of the Obama administration both Democrats and Republicans showed an unwillingness to work together on issues that affect the hospitality industry such as immigration and healthcare. Now that the mid-term election has shifted control of the House of Representatives to Republican control, both parties are going to be held accountable for what does or does not get done in congress – especially when it comes to jobs and the economy. However, a long period of posturing and bickering is expected

Multicultural is mainstream

At a recent meeting of the MFHA Board of Directors, I asked each company representative three questions: How is your company doing so far this year?, What do you think will happen with the U.S. economy after the election and how is your company looking at diversity and inclusion going into 2011? The answers were all very consistent and focused on three themes:

- We are in a 'zero growth' period in the U.S. that will last two to three years.
- Growth for the future will have an international focus.
- Managing a multicultural workforce with excellence will be key to profitability.

Clearly these corporate leaders understand that multiculturalism is now

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as each side gets accustomed to sharing power.

With employment being the number one agenda item for politicians, diversity initiatives like supplier diversity may be pushed aside. Newly elected conservatives that were backed by the Tea Party will push for deep budget cuts and multicultural programs will likely be the first to go. Minority groups and business owners have suffered the most economically during the recession. Minority restaurant franchisees have especially been hard hit. As the political power changes hands at the state and local level, minority groups will find few allies in government.

mainstream. If companies want to grow or just keep pace, they will have to learn how to access, leverage, and empower multicultural communities, customers and employees. Whether they operate domestically or internationally the key to management success will be building knowledge cross-culturally.

The 2010 U.S. Census data will start being released early in 2011. Demographers and marketing experts are already predicting tremendous growth in the Latino and immigrant populations. This means we will have more diversity, not less; we will have more multicultural market opportunity, not less, and we will need more cultural fluency, not less. The business community is beginning to figure this out. Now let's hope the politicians do too. ●