

Diversity Summit Inspires Local Workforce

Mix of individuals boost company bottom line

BY SUSAN VOGT
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Companies that employ a diverse workforce have a competitive edge that can boost the bottom line. Speaker after speaker drove that point home at the New Frontiers in Diversity Summit.

"Being 'different' is no longer thought of as 'less than,'" said Robert Hayles, a highly respected diversity consultant who co-authored the book *Diversity Directive*. "In fact, if you view things differently than I do, you'll see something I don't. Those differences and that diversity bring value to an organization, resulting in better decisions."

The April 28 conference at the Oregon Convention Center was organized and presented by Portland General Electric, drawing nearly 1,000 participants for a day filled with information and inspiration.

Hayles, who led two conference workshops, supported the connection between diversity and busi-



Summit speaker Jehan Sadat, wife of slain Egyptian president.

ness performance by citing 30 years of research conducted by experts in business and organizational development.

Hayles cautioned that a company's attitude toward diver-



Judy Shepard, whose son was murdered because he was gay, spoke out against hatred at last week's Diversity Summit.

ty is critical to achieving this performance bonus. Organizational support is the key element that helps employees look at their differences as distinguishing, rather than sepa-

rating characteristics. That attitude frees them to collectively "think outside the box."

"It's the dynamics of that particular mix of individuals that makes all the difference," he explained. "It's what they do together, that's different."

After making the business case for workplace diversity, Hayles offered several strategies for helping it become a reality:

Company leadership must take the risk to value individual differences. "It takes trust and good relationships to treat people differently in a way that benefits them individually," Hayles said.

Find the pivotal person within the organization and work with them on diversity initiatives. This may be the person most opposed, or it could be the chief financial officer. Usually, if you convince this person, those who are "on the fence" will follow.

Learn as much as you can about people individually—their relationships, demographics, hobbies, etc.—to try to understand them better.

Focus on the word "we." "If you ban the word "they" in meetings or workshops, watch how the dynamics change," he offered.

Conference attendees appreciated the hands-on lessons Hayles and other speakers offered.

"I really liked the link between a company's diversity actions and its financial performance," said Gail Kamara, a senior customer service representative at Northwest Natu-

ral. Tabitha Powell-Turner, who works in admitting at Providence Health System, said she learned much more than just the cognitive pieces: "We explored real practical issues that don't just affect corporations, but impact our communities daily."

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Diversity consultant Robert Hayles explains how organizations with a diverse mix of people usually outperform those where most folks are alike.

ference included Providence Health System, Pacific Power, Tri-Met, Fred Meyer and Northwest Natu-

ral. Susan Vogt is a Portland freelance writer.

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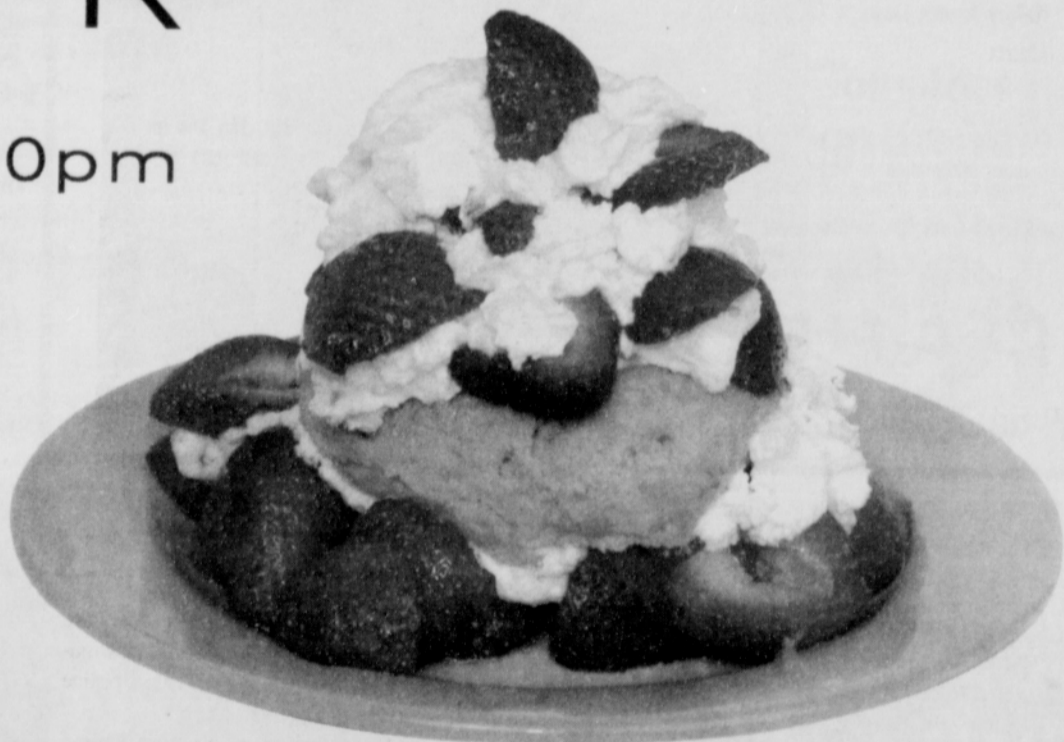
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