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The African American Noontime Technical Forum -Creating A Place For All Of Us

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The African American Noontime Technical Forum -Creating A Place For All Of Us

Abstract

Lessons learned in creating a venue within a large research and development organization for African American scientists and engineers to meet and discuss both technical and race-related topics. The forum was established to allow Black scientists and engineers to meet and dialogue without fear of alienating non-scientific African Americans, or of being misjudged by white peers.

Tommy E. Smith, Jr.

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The Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) is a national security research and development laboratory operated by the University of California for the US Department of Energy. As is typical for many national labs, the percentage of African Americans in LLNL's workforce (3.5%) is quite a bit smaller than the percentage of African Americans in the general population. African American scientists and engineers within LLNL constitute a minority within this minority. While 250 of the 7200 total employees at the lab are African American, the approximately 40 black scientists and engineers represent only 1.5% of the 2700 scientists and engineers. The combination of such small numbers and the Laboratory's relatively large campus means that many African American employees can go for significant periods of time without interacting with (or even seeing) other black employees. The Lab's African American employee association helps to address some of the cultural isolation of this environment by sponsoring various events and activities. However, most of these activities are social in nature and address topics of general interests to African Americans. In such settings, it is generally considered in bad form for scientists and engineers to engage in discourse too technical or esoteric for general participation. While this is probably true to some extent within the general population (and in some respects is simply a matter of routine courtesy), it is especially important within the black community. Exploring the reasons for this concern could warrant a session in its own right; however, few would argue with the assertion that, as a people in an ongoing struggle for legitimacy, actions or speech that could be interpreted as asserting one's worth at another's expense are meticulously avoided by most well-meaning individuals.

On the other hand, LLNL's scientific and technological culture is pervasive, and hosts a large number of events and activities for technical employees. In addition to their immediate work areas, African American technical employees are free to participate in

the myriad technical meetings and discussions that regularly occur within the Laboratory. In particular, the same topics that are so carefully avoided in African American employee group settings are enthusiastically embraced (and even expected) in these venues. While Black employees can and do participate in these activities, here they have a different taboo to observe: an unwritten, unspoken, social protocol to avoid potentially divisive references to race. This restriction is adhered to with about the same degree of diligence as those described above, albeit for different reasons. As a result, African American scientists and engineers are welcomed and embraced by both groups -but are only allowed to bring a portion of themselves to either!

The African American Noontime Technical Forum was established to help create an environment where Black technical professionals can freely explore and dialogue about subjects that they hold dear, yet they are routinely under pressure to keep separated. The forum meets during the noon hour on the fourth Friday of each month. Its goal is to create a "safe" place for African American scientists and engineers to meet and embrace both technical and race-related topics without fear of alienating non-scientific African Americans, or of being misjudged by white peers. Ultimately, the forum may speak to vitally important fundamental questions posed by this dichotomy: How much intellectual energy is tied up in maintaining this separation? and its corollary, How much greater contributions could African American professionals make if this intellectual capital was available to devote to innovation, insight, and creativity?

The presentation will cover some of the lessons learned in developing, preparing for, implementing, nurturing, and supporting the Forum as it moves towards becoming a fully viable community element within the Laboratory's workplace.

Presenter

Tommy Smith is Deputy Associate Director for Strategic Initiatives and Diversity in the Laboratory's Administration and Human Resources Directorate. In this position, he helps strategically position the Laboratory's administrative and human resources functions to ensure that LLNL will continue to have a world class, diverse workforce into the future. Prior to this appointment, he served for eight years as the Laboratory's Director of the Affirmative Action and Diversity Program (AADP), where he led the development and implementation of the Laboratory's Workforce Diversity, Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action compliance programs and activities.

Smith's career includes working for five years in the Mechanical Engineering Department supporting Livermore's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) efforts; working on ground-based laser and space-based missile defense systems. This included camera and sensor development, electron beam transport, diagnostics, and energy dissipative systems. He also worked as a mechanical engineer and designer in the Laboratory's Plant Engineering Department on energy management, facility, and utility infrastructure projects.

Smith joined Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in 1979. He studied architecture at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo; in 1984, he successfully competed for the Laboratory's Undergraduate Technical Scholarship. He holds a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering from San Francisco State University and is a Registered Professional Engineer (PE) in California, and holds a patent for co-inventing an electron energy

spectrometer (U.S. Patent No. 5,017,779).