

Widening the Network: “Ambassadors” Promote Diversity in Leadership

Summary

The Southland Regional Association of REALTORS®, which serves an area with nearly 2 million residents, implemented the Ambassadors Program to better represent the region’s widely diverse homebuyers in the Association’s leadership positions. The Association began by encouraging Hispanic and Latino REALTORS® to join committees, where they were mentored by, and eventually became, “ambassadors” charged with recruiting additional REALTORS® with a similar cultural background. The Association has now expanded the program to focus on bringing Korean American REALTORS® into leadership positions as well.

9,000
MEMBERS

Background

Based in California’s San Fernando and Santa Clarita valleys, the Southland Regional Association of REALTORS® (SRAR) serves one of the most diverse communities in the nation. The area falls within Los Angeles County (including the cities of Los Angeles, Santa Clarita, Calabasas, and San Fernando), which has a population of nearly 2 million. In Los Angeles County, about 44 percent of residents are Hispanic or Latino, 12.3 percent are Asian American, and 10 percent are African American. Brian Paul, SRAR’s Vice President of Member and Community Relations, notes that while the United Nations recognizes 45 languages within its official organization, the Los Angeles unified public school district recognizes 90. “We’re Diversity Central,” he says.

SRAR has done much to foster homeownership within its multicultural communities. With a membership of approximately 9,000, the Association has collaborated with *The Los Angeles Times* on HomeWords, a classroom project that introduces students to credit, homebuying, equity, and rent-versus-buy decisions. The Association also created the first bilingual English-Spanish resource guide for REALTORS® to use with their clients. *The Home Buying Made Easy Guide* is widely available for free. And SRAR’s Multicultural Mixer, which features food and entertainment from around the world, has brought together hundreds of REALTORS® and the public for more than a decade.

Until recently, however, non-minority members held most leadership and committee positions within SRAR. Convinced that the Association’s continued vitality required



action, SRAR looked for ways to move REALTORS® from minority groups into positions of leadership.

What the Association Did

SRAR looked first at ways in which members historically had secured committee and leadership positions. The Association determined that many committee members had been encouraged by someone they knew who was already in a leadership position on that committee. Assuming that this pattern exists in a variety of cultures, SRAR's Equal Opportunity and Cultural Diversity Committee created the Ambassador Program subcommittee in 2001, with Sally Collom as program chair.

The Ambassador Program provided opportunities for members from communities that lacked contacts within the leadership at SRAR. Paul notes, "We modified how we did business in order to ensure we brought in minority groups."

Collom and her subcommittee wanted to establish a baseline from which to evaluate the program's effectiveness. Because the California Association of REALTORS® has a policy not to identify membership by race or ethnicity, the subcommittee requested diversity information from SRAR's committees, and most complied.

The Ambassadors Program subcommittee decided to concentrate on one racial or ethnic minority at a time. They reasoned that once some members of that minority group attained leadership positions, others would have an easier time doing so. The subcommittee began with Hispanic and Latino members, whom they felt were the single most underrepresented ethnic group in SRAR's leadership.

Using member rosters and the expertise of former SRAR director Gilberto Cortes, SRAR identified real estate offices that were likely to include Latino or Hispanic Realtors® and asked to send "ambassadors" out to visit. SRAR ambassadors then served as mentors to Hispanic or Latino REALTORS® who expressed



an interest in joining a committee. The SRAR subcommittee also considered instituting, if needed, a diversity bonus procedure that authorizes the Board of Directors to add REALTORS® to a committee that has already reached capacity so long as these REALTORS® belong to an underrepresented minority.

Outcomes

The Ambassador Program has brought about more diversity in the Housing Committee, the Grievance Committee, and, of course, the Equal Opportunity and Cultural Diversity Committee. The SRAR Board of Directors has added three minority members since 2000,

and an Asian American REALTOR® who recently joined the California Association of REALTORS® Board of Directors previously chaired a committee at SRAR. Building on the success of the Ambassador Program, Paul worked with SRAR President Winnie Davis to create a program to initiate a path to leadership for minority committee members. In 2006 it received a Diversity Initiative Grant from the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® to support a diversity leadership program featuring an eight-month curriculum that will help prepare REALTORS® to become strong leaders in the community and within the association structure. This year 20 aspiring leaders took part in the class.

With the mentoring process underway for Hispanic and Latino REALTORS®, the Ambassador Program has expanded to focus on Korean American members of SRAR. The committees that were the most diverse before the launch of the Ambassador Program have shown the greatest gains in diversity. Diversity has been slower to achieve in committees where there were fewer minority members to begin with.

Nevertheless, Brian Paul is optimistic. "We changed our own culture within our Association," he says, and the implications are beginning to show. Recent homeowner insurance problems faced by Californians were most apparent in minority communities, and members of these communities brought the matter to the Association's attention. "Our ability to identify and react to this problem so quickly was a direct result of the diversity that we have in our committee membership."

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