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Through Another's Eyes:

Helping Diverse Condominium Communities Thrive!

There is only one way to look at things until someone shows us how to look at them with different eyes - Pablo Picasso

Few moments of my career will ever compare to the day I arrived at work to a protest outside of the management office because of Christmas decorations. I cut my teeth in the world of condominium property management in my late teens by floating as an administrator for a large property management firm in Toronto. At one location, the holiday season was fast approaching, and the property manager for the site had purchased several Merry Christmas banners for the lobby. The superintendent dutifully installed the banners as directed,

and the property manager sat back and waited in the management office for the appreciation to begin rolling in for their kind gesture.

Not What We Expected

Soon after, the phone rang, but it was not a call of appreciation. "What about Hanukkah? Why is Christmas all that matters?"

The next call was the same, as was the call after. The property manager, unaware of the religious elements involved, sent me to the nearest party store to purchase Happy Hanukkah banners to be installed underneath the Merry Christmas banners. We all went home for the evening, thinking the problem was solved.

The next day, I arrived to work and vividly recall turning the corner from the lobby to the management office to see a line-up of about 20 displeased individuals. Their quiet admonishments turned into a loud upset when they saw me. "There she is!" said one woman. "That's her!" said another. Equipped with sacred texts, history lessons and measuring tapes – one by one, they entered the office to lodge their complaints about the decorations. It quickly became evident that the property manager's quick decision to send me for Happy Hanukkah banners they day prior had backfired, and he had unintentionally offended the sizeable Jewish community that resided in the building. What is interesting in hindsight was that the complaint had more to do with the fact



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that the letters on the Hanukkah banners were 2 inches smaller than the letters on the Christmas banners. It was not that the residents did not appreciate the decorative gesture, but they did not feel that the acknowledgement had been equal. One set of decorations looked valuable; the other looked like a cheap afterthought, (and really, it was.)

Fostering Equality

This was the first example in my career of just how important it is to include and acknowledge all members of a community equally. Moreover, what I took away from the hours spent de-escalating the angry residents, was that it might have been better not to decorate at all rather than put up decorations which (intentionally or not) showed favour to one demographic over another.

Fast forward 15 years to 2020: inclusion is more critical than ever before. Equal treatment is no longer a request – it is an expectation. And property managers are expected to ensure that this right to equality is preserved for all. In fact, the very first component of the CMRAO Code of Ethics for property managers states that managers must: “treat people fairly, honestly and with integrity.” It can be difficult to foster a community image of equality and inclusion when the demographics within the community do not ‘mesh’ well.

Here are a few common (and not so common) solutions to obstacles precipitated by the varying needs of different residents within the condominium community:

Different languages

- Post and send notices distributed in key languages as found within your community.

- When sending your meeting notices out, offer to accommodate translators at upcoming owners meetings for those that may have needs and invite them to reach out to the management office.

Different age demographics

- If your building has mostly senior residents, trying to fit a notice on to one page becomes less critical; increase the font size of communications to your residents to assist all.
- Offer various communication platforms to suit the needs of the different demographics which exist within the building. For example, create an online maintenance request portal for the more tech-savvy residents but maintain the paper options for those that are not as comfortable with computers.
- Provide a microphone to speakers at owner’s meetings so that folks with audibility issues aren’t struggling to hear. There are also new devices that speakers can wear to connect to hearing aids in the room directly, and offering this support with meeting notices may also be a good idea for communities with broad senior demographics.

Different religious/political/lifestyle preferences

- Create a Recreation and Inclusion Board – a spot where residents can post about upcoming events and holidays of significance for their family.
- During local elections, offer to host an all-candidates meeting in the community or party room (if your building has one), and invite all parties to attend. Most candidates will appreciate the opportunity to reach a large number of voters all at once, and most residents will enjoy the opportunity to participate.

- When in doubt, just ask! Ask your community what it wants to celebrate – and how it wants to celebrate. Online and/or paper surveys are still a great way to gain insight and guide inclusive platforms in the community. From a feedback perspective, the survey results can be a handy tool to have on hand for any pushback if any non-participants get upset.

Different mental health needs

- When sending out newsletters, in addition to rule reminders and meeting save-the-dates, etc., offer tips to boost mental health. One of the best ways to help include individuals that may be struggling with various aspects of their mental wellbeing is to create awareness about mental health and let them know they are not alone.

A property manager’s job would be made a million times easier if all residents spoke the same language, had the same communication preferences, celebrated the same holidays, and followed the same political parties. Such a community will rarely if ever, exist. Boards and managers should adjust their expectations accordingly and develop a repertoire of community cohesion strategies if they are to survive in their roles. ■

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