A new diversity program is aimed at literally changing the face of Kansas City’s commercial real estate and development industry.

Responding to a striking lack of minorities in those industries, Councilman Scott Wagner and Mayor Sly James began working with local industry leaders for solutions last year. The result was creation of a Project REAP (Real Estate Associate Program) chapter in Kansas City, which became the ninth metro market the program serves.

Of the 24 applicants selected to participate in the chapter's first 10-week program, 19 graduated last month. And one of them, Tiffany Harris, already has been offered a job as assistant property manager for Copaken Brooks, a program sponsor.

"You have to create your own talent; otherwise you're just raiding everyone else's shop," said Mark Thomas, Copaken Brooks' chief property management officer and one of the industry experts who served as Project REAP instructors.

Thomas said greater diversity brings multiple benefits — from a broadened talent pool to getting more people of color interested in catalytic development in the area's communities of color. He said Harris entered Project REAP as a step toward her goal of becoming an East Side affordable-housing developer.

"That's why she really jumped out at me — because she has a plan," he said. "Now she can learn the ins and outs of leasing, management, brokerage, and when she's ready to take that (development) leap, she'll be armed with the knowledge she needs."

Don't reinvent the wheel

Many companies have strategies for making their workforces resemble the communities they operate in. But plugging into an existing diversity program like Project REAP makes the most sense — in real estate or any other industry where such a program is available, said Ruben Alonso, president of AltCap, a community development financial institution that supports investment in local low- to moderate-income communities. Alonso was an organizer of Kansas City's Project REAP chapter.
The program, created by some of the nation's largest real estate associations, "was a perfect fit for what we were trying to do. So it was real plug-and-play," he said.

A ready-made network

Unlike professions that can be accessed through college degrees, people often get into commercial real estate through networks of personal connections, Alonso said. One benefit of Project REAP, he said, is that it starts minorities off with a powerful, ready-made network: the program's many organizers, instructors and other supporters.

Designed for success

Minorities make up less than 1 percent of management-level employees in commercial real estate. To change that, Project REAP believes in catering to participants who already have a college education and a skill set to build on.

"They are all college graduates and have to have three years of prior, consistent work history," Thomas said. "And they have to have skin in the game. It costs each applicant $800 to go through the curriculum."

Going it alone?

If an organization can't plug into an existing program for increasing diversity, many positive steps still can be taken. For instance, firms can ask existing employees and community organizations for referrals. They can provide diversity training to foster a more inclusive workforce. And they can focus on retention efforts if turnover among minority employees becomes a trend.

Sources said such steps are becoming crucial as a brutal talent war looms. By 2020, it's projected that there will be 23 million U.S. jobs that can't be filled because there aren't enough qualified candidates.

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