

Women of AHLAF: Focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

By **Ellen Meyer** - March 3, 2021



AHLAF Trustee Malaika Myers, chief human resources officer at Hyatt, and Board Secretary/Treasurer Julienne Smith, SVP of upscale development and transactions and asset management at IHG

This week, *LODGING* is turning the spotlight on the [women serving on the 2021 AHLA Foundation \(AHLAF\) Board of Trustees](#). These ambitious and successful female executives bring decades of hospitality experience to their Board positions, and their perspective is essential as the hotel industry begins to rebound from the devastating impact of COVID-19.

AHLAF Trustee Malaika Myers, who is chief human resources officer at Hyatt Hotels Corporation, and Board Secretary/Treasurer Julienne Smith, who is senior vice president of upscale development and transactions and asset management at InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG), are now working together on [AHLAF's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion \(DE&I\) Task Force](#). As they told *LODGING*, both see their DE&I Task Force participation as a continuation of their work in their respective positions as it relates to their commitment to their own employees, as well as their industry.

How did you first get involved with AHLA and AHLAF?

Myers: I joined the AHLA Foundation Board in early 2019, shortly after entering the hospitality industry in 2017 in my current role at Hyatt. The Foundation supports and delivers important work that is critically important to Hyatt. This includes initiatives that move our industry forward and drive positive impact in our communities, including its efforts to address human trafficking, develop our workforce, and provide opportunities for disadvantaged communities. I welcome the opportunity to learn from and share best practices with industry peers so we can collectively make progress.

Smith: AHLA has been on my radar since joining the hotel industry in 2002. I became involved more heavily after attending the first ForWard conference in Chicago in 2018. Upon joining IHG in 2019, I was

invited to join the Foundation Board and have been honored to serve in that way. The focus on our next generation of talent is imperative to take our great industry to the next level. Experience, innovation, and acceptance of change will help us successfully navigate the future, and we can achieve that by encouraging and coaching new talent to succeed in the hotel industry.

What made you join the DE&I Task Force?

Myers: I have been involved in diversity, equity, and inclusion work for more than 25 years, dating back to my graduate school days at the University of Buffalo, where I created a Minority Management Association. As a Black woman—often the only one in the room—I have always looked for ways to open doors and advance access for underrepresented groups. It was therefore natural for me to lean into this work as part of the DE&I Task Force. I'm inspired by the commitment the AHLA Foundation has made of \$5 million over the next five years to advance DE&I within the hotel and lodging industry, building on so much of the work that they have already underway.

Smith: Diversity, equity, and inclusion is not only the right perspective to have and maintain in life in general, it makes good business sense. Companies have proven to be more profitable and ultimately more successful when a diverse slate of leaders come together to make strategic decisions on how to operate and guide a business, including a hotel. I am part of the DE&I Boards at IHG and have been active in this space for many years before joining IHG. It's been a natural transition to work with the DE&I Task Force at AHLAF to help bring this important effort to life in an even more impactful way, through one of the most powerful associations in the hotel industry.

What have been your top goals for the Foundation's DE&I Task Force?

Myers: Driving DE&I at the leadership level is one of the main goals of the DE&I Task Force. This means more women and people of color at leadership levels on property, in the corporate offices, and among the hotel owner community. It also means more inclusive leadership behaviors from all leaders at all levels. One of the things I am most excited about in the work of the DE&I Task Force is the opportunity to define and measure inclusive leadership. Many leaders struggle to understand what inclusion is and how they make it happen. I believe that through the AHLA DE&I Task Force, we will be able to give leaders across the industry clarity on the inclusive leadership behaviors that matter and tools to help them build those skills and capabilities.

Smith: Achieving alignment to make sure what we bring forth is translatable on multiple levels and aspects of the hotel industry has been at the forefront of our DE&I strategy work. We have hotel guests, property-level associates, investors, owners, management company, vendors, and large-brand companies to consider when ultimately communicating our vision and mission. We have a diverse Board that has worked well together to make sure we are thinking broadly while being very intentional in what we are trying to accomplish.

What can hoteliers do to support diversity and inclusion initiatives in the hotel industry?

Myers: DE&I work is personal, and the first thing I encourage leaders to do is to figure out their own inclusion story, to be able to articulate why this work matters to them. This is an important foundational step and will make individuals more effective in their DE&I initiatives. I would encourage hoteliers to both give to and take from the work that the DE&I Task Force is doing to impact real change—that is, if something is working, share it with us so that we can share it with others, and if you're unsure of where to start, use the tools and materials the Task Force provides to guide you.



Smith: The first step is to have honest and open-minded conversations about where they believe they are in their own diversity journey within their business. The follow up to this hard work is to create an action plan to support those who are underrepresented by providing tools for advancement, creating mentorship programs, supporting listening sessions, and continuously communicating goals and intentions. A commitment to interview a diverse slate of candidates to ultimately ensure diverse hires at all levels, including post-graduate recruitment, is an ongoing endeavor that should be kept on the forefront.

Editor's note: Read LODGING's spotlights on the women serving on the 2021 AHLAF Board [here](#).

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