

Managing Diversity: Keeping It in Focus

A

few years ago, the Hudson Institute published *Workforce 2000*. The document predicted some changes in the workforce that were expected to materialize in this country by the year 2000. Some of the significant demographic shifts predicted were the following:

- Women would represent more than 60 percent of new labor force entrants.
- Eighty-five percent of net new entrants would be non-white men and women of all races.
- The average age of the American worker would increase from 35 to 39.
- The number of workers aged 16 to 24 would decrease by nearly 8 percent.

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Diversity

Goals to

Business

Troy Coleman

Although some newer studies project a more conservative rate and extent of change in these demographics, there is no doubt that the workforce and the community are changing, evolving with a different race, gender, age, culture, lifestyle, and ability mix than has existed to date. These demographic changes, regardless of the magnitude of their rate, should be regarded as signals that the environments in which we live and work will be different from our past environments. With revelations such as these, employers should recognize the need to assess their corporate cultures and implement changes necessary to become more responsive and receptive to the newly evolving workforce.

The Lessons of Change

We must be alert to the fact that to attract and retain the best workers available from our nation's talent pool, we must be open to changes within our organizations. We must plan strategically to meet the needs of an evolving workforce and community base. We must learn how to communicate and work effectively with a different group of coworkers and customers. This is managing diversity.

In managing diversity, the organization must address the relationship between individual and work-team behavior and performance success. The organization also must address its ability to create and maintain an environment that empowers employees and associates to better serve its racially, socially, and ethnically diverse customer base.

What Managing Diversity Is Not

During our training and development efforts over the past few years, we have heard several misconceptions expressed about managing diversity. These misconceptions reflect concern, fear, ignorance, denial, and deliberate deception. They may have developed as a result of one's position in life, one's exposure to diverse social environments (or lack thereof), or one's knowledge of and comfort level with others who may be different from oneself.

Some of these common misconceptions about managing diversity include:

Misconception #1. Managing diversity is a disguise for affirmative action programs. Often, in an organization where perceptions and behaviors are not managed carefully, some people express and act out the opinion that the organization's goals for managing diversity simply are an attempt to sneak in affirmative ac-

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tion goals and quotas, so that unqualified minorities and women can be hired or promoted at the expense of more qualified white men.

Managing diversity is a process that creates opportunities to attract and retain the best and the brightest talent, which allows the organization to maintain its competitiveness. This approach may require assessing the skill mix of existing organizational members to determine whether their skills and competencies are consistent accommodations with the needs of the organization as it is evolving into new programs, services, and approaches. This assessment is crucial to determine whether the organization is positioned to attract and retain the best talent available—regardless of race or gender—in order to compete in the marketplace and succeed.

The challenge to the organization is not in creating diversity, but rather in maintaining a corporate culture that will encourage the diverse workers to stay and contribute over time.

Misconception #2. Managing diversity is cultural diversity training. Some may think that managing diversity is simply teaching appropriate behaviors to use when interacting with people of specific races, national origins, mental or physical abilities, sexual orientations, or lifestyles.

Managing diversity goes beyond learning to act out a prescribed behavior. For some organizations or work teams, it will mean a basic change in the way people communicate, interact, process information, make decisions, and serve customers. It is not a quick-fix recipe. Successful interpersonal relations that ultimately lead to business success require that we learn to be sensitive to and empathic with others. In recalling situations when we have felt that we were not part of the group setting the norm, we can identify the type of support and encouragement that we all must extend to each other in the workplace and the community. This recognition also carries with it a responsibility for action and possibly behavioral change so we may include and respect those who differ from us.

Misconception #3. Managing diversity is sensitivity training. Managing diversity is not some touchy-feely training session designed to help us get in touch with our feelings so we can relate to others on a higher social and spiritual order. Managing diversity is not a training program designed to bring us up-to-date on the newest conflict-avoidance tactics so we can avoid mashing others' "hot buttons."

Managing diversity is a way for us to understand and appreciate ourselves better so we can understand the factors and situations that moti-

vate our personal beliefs, values, and behaviors. This allows us to accept, then respect, others who may have different beliefs, values, lifestyles, and ways of doing things at work. When we recognize and accept our own values and workstyle, we will develop confidence in someone else's ability to achieve our common work-related goals by using a different approach. There is truth to the old adage "Two heads are better than one."

Misconception #4. Managing diversity is an effort to mirror our customers or citizen base. At times, managers and organization leaders feel it is important that we mirror, or look like, the customers or citizens we serve. While it may give us some initial comfort, merely having work teams that look like those we serve cannot represent the ultimate goal for achieving business success.

When we simply focus on matching race for race, or gender for gender, we lose out on opportunities to share in the richness that others may bring to the table. When we manage diversity effectively, we discover that added personal differences or personal similarities cannot be attributed necessarily to race, gender, or lifestyle. We get better at recognizing the differences, respecting the differences, and expecting the differences to enrich our relationship and contribute to better-quality performance and behavior results.

Defining Diversity

Managing diversity is defined as creating and maintaining an environment in which each person is respected because of his or her differences, and where all can contribute and be rewarded based on their results.

Some of us may not have experience interacting with people who are different from us or who do not conform to the historic "white male standard" for social and business success.

The changing dynamics of the available talent pool nevertheless make it necessary to bring men and women of different races, cultures, lifestyles, values, and work orientation into the work team. Once we recognize that these work team members are a vital part of the workforce, we will realize we must take steps necessary to retain them as members who contribute to our work team and organizational success.

In looking at our definition, "respected because of their differences" means that we need to understand, first, that different does not mean less-than and, second, that different approaches and different opinions can be beneficial to making decisions and providing service delivery to a diverse customer base.

"Rewarded on the basis of their results" means that people should be rewarded on the basis of what they do and how they produce, not on the basis of who they know or what they look like. With confidence gained in a corporate environment that values fairness and equity, all employees are empowered to perform to the best of their abilities, with full assurance that they will be recognized and rewarded according to the same measure used for all workers.

Implications for Managing Diversity

Managing diversity is a process, not a program. Programs are generally compartmentalized sets of rules, procedures, guidelines, and behaviors aimed at achieving specific outcomes. The process of managing diversity is an operating philosophy that urges us to look critically at our organization, assess the needs of our employees and clients, and determine whether our skill mix and our behavior mix are providing our services in a way that meets or exceeds our clients' expectations. Where we fall short of the service goals, there may be an indication that we must at-

tract and retain more diverse talent to serve our clients effectively.

Some organizations have been more successful in attracting a diverse talent base but have not been nearly as successful in retaining this diversity. When organizations lose men and women that represent diverse talent because of indifference, insensitivity, or discrimination, attracting diverse talent in the future becomes an even greater challenge. Almost invariably, women and minorities may pass along the word that an organization does not respect diversity and therefore is not a good place to work. With this type of reputation, an organization should consider a detailed assessment to discover the underlying factors in its corporate culture that should be changed. The necessary changes may require changing the focus or goals of the leadership team, and changing leadership style to better respond to the evolving needs of the organization, its business and community objectives, and its vision for diversity. The organization may discover that it must change the way it does business.

Any organizational changes effected must consider carefully the unique needs, wants, and values of the employees who currently contribute to the organization, the applicants who may consider joining it, the consumers or clients who may consider purchasing its goods and services, and the community it serves. Analyzing these issues can lead the organization to creative and inclusive solutions that allow effective service to a customer or citizen base, as well as the fullest use of a workforce and leadership team that will become increasingly diverse.

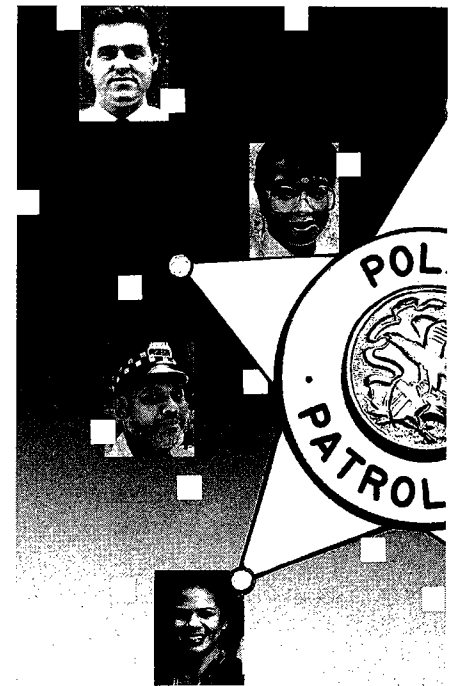
To gain a better understanding of the citizens we serve, we must make a concerted effort to communicate more effectively. The basis of effective communication must be respect—mutual R-E-S-P-E-C-T. We cannot overlook the instructions embedded in the lyrics of the popu-

lar song of the 1960s sung by Aretha Franklin. She sang, "R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me, R-E-S-P-E-C-T, take care, TCB (Take Care of Business)." I interpret that to mean that, for me to respect you—someone who is different from me—I first must respect myself. Once this base of respect has been established, we can begin concentrating on the issues that affect our ability to work together, with full respect for the unique contributions that each of us may make.

Clearly, these issues signal the need for a commitment to manage diversity, which means a long-term commitment to continuous assessment and change, not a quick fix. We have become accustomed to seeking short-term cures and painless remedies. The dynamics of managing diversity go deep into the fabric of an organization and cannot be changed substantially with a wave of the wand or a miraculous solution. When organizations seek a one-day seminar or workshop on managing diversity with no further plan of action to reinforce the desired change, the success of the diversity effort likely will be minimal and short-term at best.

To be most successful, the managing-diversity strategy should focus on individual as well as organizational change. It requires a top-down as well as bottom-up commitment and involvement. To enhance the probability of success, the process should be founded on a vision for diversity that is shared by executives, managers, supervisors, and front-line employees. All players must understand how their personal contributions to work goals will influence the success of the organization.

Goals for diversity must be tied inextricably to the business and operating goals of the organization. To assure the success of this effort, the corporate philosophy and business goals as they relate to organizational behavior and performance expectations should be communicated rou-



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tinely throughout the organization. Written rules and guidelines affecting employee performance, behavior, and work team procedures must be considered fundamental parts of "the way things are done" in the organization. When management and employee behaviors are not in line with the written procedures, employees and clients become suspicious of the commitment to diversity. Individual or work team performance and productivity invariably suffer.

An organization's policies and practices should not be changed arbitrarily to accommodate what may be perceived as racial, cultural, social, lifestyle, gender, and other differences. Careful consideration that is based on data produced by an organizational assessment will allow integration of organizational procedures and practices with strategic human resource and business goals. This informed consideration will identify such targets for change as personal and organizational behavior and work practices that may interfere with achieving goals for managing diversity. It is important to make changes based on the causes rather than the symptoms of observable behavior.

Factors That Influence Diversity Success

Managing diversity is a comprehensive process that assesses an organization and its way of doing business. It considers the organization's competition, its customers, and its goals for business and performance success. A number of factors influence individual, work team, and organizational success in achieving diversity:

- Understanding the nature of the business or organization.
- Identifying the internal (operating rules) and external (government regulations and laws) influences.
- Recognizing the corporate resources available: funds and people with specific skills.

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- Acknowledging such threats as interpersonal and intergroup conflict or obsolete skills, and such opportunities as a new business orientation.
- Developing an organizational vision of diversity that is integrated throughout the business objectives, as opposed to one that focuses only on business goals.
- Developing a strategic plan for achieving the vision for diversity that includes a critical path for achieving specific objectives.
- Implementing a process of periodic evaluation for measuring performance-diversity success.
- Managing human resources costs

in relation to employee relations concerns.

- Motivating employees to understand and respect customers, clients, and current and prospective employees who may be different.

The Role of the Corporate Vision

From time to time, an organization may participate in exercises that yield its "corporate vision." This vision is expressed in the form of a vision statement that describes the future state or outcome of the organization. The vision statement is meant to be used as a guiding force to challenge the organizations to continually strive toward creating or maintaining that desired state.

Organizations will be well served to develop vision statements that incorporate diversity issues throughout the future focus. The new corporate vision should project the meaningful involvement of people with differences whose unique contributions based on their backgrounds, values, cultures, and expressions improve the organization's performance results.

To take advantage of these distinctive contributions, the organization must empower and encourage workers to perform to the best of their abilities. The new organization will see itself differently; it will operate with values, performance standards, behavioral modes, and operating systems based on the input of all participants. The quality and content of its results will be enhanced by these differences.

Managing Conflict

Conflict and dissonance in organizations often occur when our behavior and interaction with each other is based on personal notions or stereotypes that standardize our behavior and expectations. A stereotype is defined as a fixed or conventional notion or idea about a person or group,

allowing no room for individuality. When we operate on the basis of a stereotype, we limit our knowledge of or experience with others on the basis of this notion. We cannot take advantage of the uniqueness brought to the table by the individual.

It is important to recognize and avoid the use of any personally offensive phrase (POP) in the workplace. POPs, used knowingly or unintentionally, can create barriers to communication and cause bad feelings, mistrust, or tension among coworkers. A POP can cause reduced productivity or hostility that detracts from the potential success of the work group. POPs may include racial slurs, sexual innuendos, sexually suggestive gestures, or other, similarly offensive communication. Essentially, there is no place for that type of behavior at work.

Who Is Responsible?

It must be clear that managing diversity is not just the responsibility of top management or human resources directors. Unless achieving diversity is recognized as the shared responsibility of every individual in the organization, any effort will have limited success. It may not always be understood what responsible behavior is. Basic principles include: the firm commitment of upper management to creating and maintaining diversity in the workplace; employee recognition of the impact of individual contributions; understanding of how personal rewards are tied to organizational success; relating the respecting of differences to improved productivity and morale, as well as to reduced cost of doing business; and changing of offensive behaviors (see box at right).

Creating a Successful Diversity Effort

To create the greatest possibility for success in the diversity effort, the or-

ganization must develop and follow closely a carefully crafted strategic plan. The strategic diversity plan needs a clear tactical implementation process that lays out specifically what is to be done, by whom, and when in order to achieve each increment of result desired. This implementation effort is intentionally long-term in nature.

This strategic plan for diversity should involve a wide range of employees—top executives through front-line employees—in each stage of the process to achieve maximum ownership. This approach lays the foundation for the full awareness, support, and accountability of each individual in the workplace and will result in the desired behavioral and performance goals. The planning process for strategic diversity should include the following elements:

- Top-level commitment and involvement to achieve a vision for corporate success that integrates diversity into the organization's business objectives. This integrated vision must address recruiting and selection, hiring and promotion, training and development, employee benefits, compensation and rewards, succession planning, and affirmative action.
- Diverse task groups charged with assessing organizational culture to identify elements that support or interfere with achieving diversity or business objectives. There can be no sacred cows.
- Tailored awareness training that helps all employees understand the need for developing behaviors that reflect the stated commitment to effective communication and to respecting and valuing different contributions in order to achieve specified outcomes.
- Leadership training to help all supervisors, managers, and leaders to acquire critical skills for facilitating diverse interaction and work processes and to take full ad-

vantage of differences while minimizing disruptive conflict.

- Critical benchmarks by which to measure success in meeting diversity and related business goals.
- Strategies for rewarding or correcting performance and behaviors, so that the organization can stay on course with the strategic diversity plan.

Guidelines for Responsible Behavior

- All employees must recognize the impact of their behavior and performance on achievement of the organization's business and diversity goals.
- Employees must know the answer to the questions "What is in it for me?" and "Why should I contribute to making diversity successful?"
- There must be work team and organizational commitment to defined personal work team, and organizational success and rewards.
- A more productive work environment must be created through targeted training for all; improved organizational rules, procedures, and practices that integrate diversity goals and business objectives; and improved formal and informal communication processes.
- Behavior must change that is acknowledged to be demeaning or offensive, including racial slurs, race and gender jokes, and sexually suggestive comments or gestures, in order to improve respect and build trust.
- Formally defined rules, procedures, and reward systems should be tied to the desired performance and behavior goals.

All of these areas need to be evaluated regularly. It is imperative that the organization's environment and culture allow all employees comfortably and openly to discuss issues that offend them or hamper them in their work. Such openness allows appropriate assessment of the issues and leads the way to positive change that will create and maintain an environment in which all can contribute to the best of their abilities.

No longer can organizations afford to discount automatically or to discredit comments or complaints of indifferent or unfair treatment. Respecting differences means that those concerns must be heard and given enough credence to warrant investigation. When dissonant behavior is identified, immediate action must be taken to resolve the conflict before it affects the entire organization. This may represent a departure

from the organization's past behavior, but this new behavior is crucial to the success of managing differences at work. Successfully managed diversity in the workplace is tied to reduced turnover, better management of training costs, improved morale, better-managed employee relations costs, greater productivity, and the reduction of other employee-related costs.

At this point, hopefully, you have concluded that there is no quick fix in managing diversity. You should realize that a one-day miracle seminar is not sufficient to produce laudable success. A diversity briefing for the executive team or a sensitivity training session for the employees will not "diversify" your organization. These short-term approaches are usually short-sighted and miss issues that are critical to changing the way the organization treats its employees, its

clients, or its citizens.

You may, in fact, be thinking that this "diversity thing" is so big and so pervasive that we can "never hope to get our arms around it." You may be tempted just to give up and return to business as usual.

The steps in this article, however, are intended to show how the diversity process can be achieved in definable increments. You should be able to see how diversity can be managed over time, in much the same way that you can manage your annual operating budgets or the business or services you provide your customers. Tying diversity goals to the organization's other business goals makes good management sense. **DM**

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