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ABSTRACT

Certain myths cause some people to fear or resist diversity training; other myths overstate its outcomes and effectiveness. Many workers--white males in particular--fear that in the rush for a more diverse workplace, they will lose out. Their fears can be addressed by delivering training in a way that convinces employees that the organization's diversity programs do not seek to displace white males but to prepare workers and managers to work in a heterogeneous environment. Diversity is not synonymous with affirmative action. Successful processes to establish focus and content of training include needs assessment, organization's demonstrated commitment to diversity issues, and organizational communication about the goals and objectives of its specific diversity program. Diversity training programs should help each participant treat other people as those others wish to be treated. Rather than trying to change values, diversity programs should help people look at specific behaviors that cause pain or problems and find ways to avoid them. Training effectiveness should not be linked to participant satisfaction or determined using measurement standards. Incentives for diversity training include legal, humanitarian, and ethical concerns, but the one common incentive shared by all organizations is the realization of economic reward for their diversity training efforts. (YLB)

Diversity Training
Myths and Realities No. 13

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Diversity Training

Work force demographics, which reveal increased diversity among the working population, are triggering a huge growth in diversity training programs. Although these programs typically are designed to improve working relationships, many of them are accompanied by a backlash from those who do not agree with the focus of the programs or the messages they deliver. Some people believe that diversity training should focus only on those categories protected by law—race, gender, and disability. Others argue for a more inclusive definition encompassing age, educational level, family structure, job function, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and values. However, it is the messages these programs deliver that spark the greatest controversy. This publication considers myths that cause some people to fear or resist diversity training as well as myths overstating its outcomes and effectiveness.

Do Diversity Programs Discriminate against the Majority?

Many workers—white males in particular—fear that in the rush for a more diverse workplace, they will lose out. They believe that, in the past, having the right qualifications has been the sole basis for realizing most workers' employment and advancement goals. Now equity quotas and diversity benefits for minorities are being added to the employment equation, creating discomfort for many workers. Unless the fears of those who believe that racial or gender diversity goals will overshadow their own employment status are addressed, companies are likely to experience employee backlash from their diversity training efforts (Day 1995).

The way training is delivered can perpetuate discrimination fears by making some groups feel that they are the villains and others the victims. For example, diversity training that focuses solely on the stereotyping of women and minorities places white males in the role of perpetrators instead of including them in the equity equation. People don't want to hear that they have been successful only because of their skin color, nor do they want to hear that they alone are responsible for the oppression of female and minority workers (Flynn 1999). Employees must be convinced that the organization's diversity programs "do not seek to displace white males, but rather to prepare workers and managers to work in a heterogeneous environment, one where everyone can compete equally for organizational resources" (Ricucci 1997, p. 39).

Diversity training may also be perceived as a source of reverse discrimination, especially when the trainers hired to deliver the training are selected solely because they represent a minority population, rather than because they possess diversity training skills (Flynn 1999). Studies show that some people who assume the role of diversity trainer are not qualified to deal with the issues that surface in these programs (ibid.). Although they many have interpersonal skill training experience, some diversity trainers have limited knowledge of multicultural issues, personal law, group dynamics, and teaching techniques. Some have been accused of using confrontational tactics or of taking out their anger for perceived transgressions on the training participants.

Is Diversity Synonymous with Affirmative Action?

Because diversity training in many organizations is initiated as a result of lawsuits or federal mandates, it is often equated with affirmative action. When this is true, diversity training typically receives low priority and is limited to those initiatives driven by the law, e.g., sexual harassment policy, accommodation of workers with disabilities, equal employment directives. Diversity is much broader than these issues. It includes differences in age, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, values, language, education, lifestyle, beliefs, physical appearance and economic status. "Each of these characteristics can affect an employee's attitudes and behaviors in the workplace, as well as influence his or her ability to work well with other employees" (Wentling and Palma-Rivas 2000, p. 36). When dealing with a work force that is increasingly characterized by people with diverse characteristics, everyone's issues must be valued.

Because each company has its own diversity-related issues, no one approach or set of standards can be used to establish the focus and content of training. However, some processes have proven to be successful—the use of a needs assessment to determine the specific issues the organization must address, a demonstrated commitment by the organization to diversity issues, and organizational communication about the goals and objectives of its specific diversity program (Wentling 2001). Global organizations may have a different set of objectives than corporations that operate within the United States. However, in a service economy, effective interactions and communications between workers and their customers have become an essential element in an organization's success.

Do Diversity Training Programs Encourage "Treating Others as We Wish to Be Treated"?

Although at first glance the philosophy of treating others as we wish to be treated may seem to capture the goal of diversity training, there is a major flaw in this message. People do not have the same values about how they wish to be treated. A more appropriate suggestion for diversity training would be to help each participant treat other people as *those others* wish to be treated (Barak 2000). Workplace diversity programs should encourage divergent points of view and behaviors, not merely reinforce the ones that participants currently have.

Barak (2000) argues that organizations need to expand their notion of diversity to include all systems in the workplace—individual and intergroup differences within the work force, cooperation with the surrounding community, attention to disadvantaged groups in its wider environment, and collaboration with individuals, groups, and organizations across national and cultural borders. He supports an inclusive workplace characterized by open management-employee meetings and e-mail systems and representatives reflecting each type of diversity in the organization's information networks and decision-making processes.

Are the Most Effective Diversity Programs Value Driven?

Although personal behavior is influenced by one's internal value structure, values are not the basis for effective interactions between people of various and divergent viewpoints and characteristics. Many diversity programs are value driven, having the intent of changing people's attitudes, beliefs, or feelings about other people. They tell participants how they "should" think or feel, which creates resistance. No matter how positively the message is delivered, "any attempt to change someone's attitudes, beliefs, or values is exactly that, an attempt to change who they are" (Karp and Sammour 2000, p. 4).

Another approach to dealing with the different attitudes that people have about diversity training and its effects is to start the program with a clear statement of values that includes explicit mention of participants' rights to express how they see things and how they feel about comments that are being made, within the boundaries of good group dynamic principles. In this way, diversity programs can help participants look at specific behaviors that cause pain or problems and find ways to avoid them. Although people may not change their values, they can change their behaviors. They can develop the skills they need to create a more positive and productive working environment for all members of the organization (ibid.).

Is Training Effectiveness Linked to Participant Satisfaction?

Few people like change, so any company that bases the success of its training program on participant satisfaction is bound to be disappointed, at least in the short run. Change takes time and practice. Few participants are going to feel that they can implement changes immediately after a training session. This is especially true when the program lasts for only one day, as many company-sponsored programs do. A survey of public and private human resources specialists (Ricucci 1997) revealed that over 70 percent of diversity training programs are one day or less in length; Ricucci calls this a strategy that results in failure.

Can Program Effectiveness Be Determined Using Measurement Standards?

There are no common standards for the objectives and content of diversity training. Few published research studies document the effectiveness of diversity programs (Day 1995; Wentling and Palma-Rivas 2000). Yet, the globalization of many corporations, which has created the need for multicultural perspectives in dealing with employees, customers, and suppliers from around the world, requires that organizations realize effective outcomes from their diversity efforts. Because evaluation continues to be a major concern, many corporations are tying their diversity initiatives to the bottom line. Diversity initiatives, when successful, can increase productivity, help companies respond better to diverse markets, and enhance the organization's ability to compete. Additionally, they can lead to a more diverse (and thereby creative) work force, reduce turnover from dissatisfied workers, and increase worker potential by offering educational and mentoring programs (Wentling 2001).

Conclusion

A study by Wentling and Palma-Rivas (2000) confirms that many international corporations are planning, developing, and implementing a variety of domestic diversity initiatives. Although domestic

corporations may have less sophisticated programs, all corporations are striving for increased productivity of workers, the ability to respond to diverse markets, and an enhanced ability to be competitive forces in the marketplace. Many organizations have stated that ethical concerns and humanitarianism are the incentives that motivate them to offer diversity training; others tie their efforts to initiatives supported by law. The one common incentive shared by all organizations, however, is the realization of economic reward for their diversity training efforts. When diversity training helps organizations be productive and compete successfully in the global market, employers and employees reap economic rewards. When diversity training programs lead to collaboration, cooperation, and respect among workers, employers and employees reap emotional rewards.

People need to see the benefits from change before they give their unconditional support to a program. They need to feel that they are part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Diversity trainers can inspire this type of commitment by involving workers in the planning process; setting guidelines for appropriate behavior; establishing a set time for the length of the training, including number of training sessions; and working with resistance so that it is a positive force in the training effort. Diversity training is more likely to be successful when it is part of a strategic process to which management is committed and involves ongoing assessment and modification as an organization's needs change (Wentling 2001).

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