According to surveys of companies employing more than 100 workers, the number of companies with diversity training (DT) programs increased from 40% in 1992 to 50-56% in 1996. Motivations behind DT include compliance with legal mandates, fear of lawsuits, social justice, desire to expand into diverse markets, and overall organizational transformation. At the same time, a backlash against DT is arising that has been explained in terms of such factors as reaction to rapid social change, deep-seated prejudice, misunderstanding of diversity, and badly planned and implemented training programs. One core issue is lack of consensus regarding the meaning of diversity. To some, DT should be focused narrowly on those categories protected by law (race, gender, and disability), whereas others argue for a more inclusive definition encompassing age, educational level, family structure, job function, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and values. Effective DT programs start with an inclusive definition of diversity and clear objectives that are linked with organizational goals and that reflect employee involvement in design and top-level support. Effective DT programs also focus on finding ways for people to work cooperatively despite differing perspectives. Contains an annotated bibliography of 29 print and Web-based resources. (MN)
Diversity Training
Trends and Issues Alerts

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Diversity Training

In the multicultural 1990s, workplace diversity training (DT) initiatives are everywhere. Surveys of companies employing over 100 indicate that about 40% had DT programs in 1992, 30-56% by 1995 (Gordon 1995; Westling and Palm-Rivas 1997). The American Society for Training and Development's 1990 survey turned up 80 diversity trainers in 1990, 138 in 1995 (Westling and Palm-Rivas 1997). Motivations behind DT include compliance with legal mandates, fear of lawsuits, social justice, desire to expand into diverse markets, and overall organizational transformation. At the same time, a backlash is arising and "diversity training programs are exploding in their sponsors' faces" (Gordon 1995, p. 25). Reasons for the backlash may be reaction to rapid social change, deep-seated prejudice, sensationalistic journalism, misunderstanding of diversity and its identification with "political correctness," and badly planned and implemented training programs (Mobley and Payne 1992).

One core issue is the lack of consensus on the meaning of diversity: To some, the focus is narrowly on those categories protected by law: primarily race, gender, and disability (Day 1995); training is thus limited, ineffectively, to "changing white males" (Karp and Sutton 1993). Others argue for a broadly inclusive definition that encompasses age, educational level, family structure, job function, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and values, among others (Pegg 1997) and a focus on understanding and valuing the "varied perspectives and approaches to work" that people of all types of backgrounds bring (Thomas and Ely 1996, p. 85).

Characteristics of flawed DT programs include slothfulness of people into identity groups; trainers who represent only one point of view; attempts to change attitudes and personal opinions, not behavior; initiatives that are not connected to organizational goals and lack management commitment; providers who lack credentials, have a political agenda, deliver off-the-shelf programs, or use unauthentic, hostile tactics; training that is brief, perfunctory, or punitive; and hiring, promotion, and reward systems that do not practice what the programs preach (Day 1995; Gordon 1995; Karp and Sutton 1993; Mobley and Payne 1993). Effective programs start with an inclusive definition of diversity and clear objectives that are linked with organizational goals: employees are involved in their design and top-level support is evident. Training teams reflect diverse points of view, and training includes awareness (examining assumptions, biases, stereotypes) and skill development (listening, communication, conflict resolution). Resistance is confronted by providing facts, appealing to deep values, and identifying human commonalities while recognizing the great variation in their expression. Overall, the focus is on finding ways for people to work cooperatively despite differing perspectives. Beyond a token diversity training program, what is required is an organizational culture change that incorporates respect for diversity into policies, procedures, and practices. The print and web resources listed here provide additional information.

Print Resources


Shows a series of steps that can be used by employers to initiate or modify a diversity program based on the city of San Diego's experience.


Diversity implies differences in people based on their identifications with various groups. Organizations that have welcomed diversity are more productive and have a competitive advantage. Diversity training can be awareness based (cognitive) or skill based (behavioral).


Attempts to define diversity, identifies the conflict often associated with it, and investigates the conditions under which diversity can benefit organizations and the ways in which organizations must change in order to benefit.


Organizational culture holds the key to the long-term success of diversity efforts. Diversity professionals who specialize in multiculturalism and organizational communication should embrace theories that yield a "managing diversity" approach.


Bad diversity training programs can be damaging. The case of training gone awry at the Federal Aviation Administration (in which participants filed formal complaints and investigations followed into the specific training practices used) illustrates the importance of careful development of diversity training.


Includes "The Status of Valuing and Managing Diversity in Fortune 500 Manufacturing and Fortune 500 Service Organizations," (Sanjoy J. Johnson); "A Theory of Diversity" (Christopher Washington); "Work Force Diversity in Fortune 500 Corporations Headquartered in Minnesota: Concepts and Practices" (Karin Tommervik); and "Race and Ethnicity-Related Cultural Diversity Training Programs: A Typology" (Larry C. Martin).


Cultural diversity affects organizations in several ways: recruitment, retention, outreach beyond traditional clientele, management styles and decision making, and interpersonal relationships. Intercultural effectiveness can be improved by making training strategic, building cultural knowledge, targeting unconscious discrimination, and studying non-Western worldviews.

Gordon, J. "Different from What?" Training 32, no. 3 (May 1995): 25-34. (ED 304 456)

Some workplace diversity programs have been hostile, as diversity training has become a full-blown industry in the United States. The best approach may be to recognize commonalities and to be willing to capitalize on differences.


This guide for individuals and organizations moves beyond diversity awareness training toward systems, processes, and behavior that promote substantive, lasting change. It presents individual, group, and organizational development models as well as tools and techniques.

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It is critical that managers and supervisors promote new attitudes and behavior. A second stage of diversity training should focus on the application of diversity ideas and the development of an environment that is conducive to conflict resolution.

Thomas, D.A., and Ebb, R.J. "Making Differences Matter." Harvard Business Review 74, no. 5 (September-October 1996): 95-100. Explains why organizations should move beyond the old rationale for diversity (discrimination-firmness and access legitimacy) to the learning and effectiveness paradigm, which shows that diversity can leverage different perspectives and improve the way work is done.


Tod, J. "Professional Learning for Ethnic Cultural Diversity." International Journal of Lifelong Education 13, no. 2 (March 1994): 121-134. Reviews issues in police training and approaches to race relations education. Suggests that the learning tool place outside the classroom and be collaborative (police-community), concluding that such relations policy must be developed through a multicultural dialogue.

Van Eps, A.M. "How To Work With a Diversity Consultant." Training and Development 55, no. 4 (April 1991): 11-14. These guidelines include a checklist for selecting a consultant, comparison of diversity consultant fees, desirable personal characteristics, and additional resources.

Web Resources

American Institute for Managing Diversity, 50 Hart Plaza, Suite 1150, Atlanta, GA 30323. 404-822-8226; fax 404-822-8232; http://www.ai-md.org

Cultural Diverse at Work, 1771 Lake Cove Way NE, Suite 210, Seattle, WA 98125-8612; 206-362-0336; fax 206-362-0335; e-mail: info@diversityatwork.com; http://www.diversityatwork.com

Diversity Forum features extensive links to and listings of job openings in industries that are committed to diversity: 405-993-3440; fax: 405-993-3441; e-mail: info@diversityforum.com; http://www.diversityforum.com

National Association of Gender Diversity: Training 4621 East Altadena Lane, Phoenix, AZ 85224; 602-473-3826; fax 602-473-0472; e-mail: gender@prenunet.com; http://www.prenunet.com/gender

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