

Diversity Training in the Heartland: An Exploratory Study of Small and Mid-size Organizations

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This qualitative, exploratory study investigated the development and implementation of diversity training in small and mid-size organizations in a midwestern region. The results indicate these organizations are implementing diversity awareness programs that recognize diversity as a business imperative. Common themes found in the diversity literature are supported in this study.

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The topic of diversity has become increasingly important to organizations since the early 1990's as changing workforce demographics and increased global competition have become reality (Cox, 2001; Weiner, 1997). This interest has prompted a proliferation of diversity training programs throughout the United States. The most recent industry report conducted by *Training* indicates that 72% of the companies responding to that survey offered some form of diversity and/or cultural awareness training (Galvin, 2002).

At the same time, a variety of diversity initiatives have begun to take shape on college campuses across the country (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen & Allen, 1999). Included in these initiatives have been efforts to infuse diversity into the college curricula. As faculty in a leadership program, we have struggled with how to best integrate diversity issues into our curriculum to prepare our students to work in a multicultural society. Currently, we require majors to take a course that focuses on diversity issues as they relate to organizations and leadership.

A segment of that course focuses on organization-based diversity initiatives. Students study the theory and practice of designing and implementing diversity endeavors. Many of the available examples involve large multinational companies with sufficient resources to apply to diversity programs. While the students find this interesting in theory, it inevitably prompts questions of what can be done in smaller companies, like the small or mid-size organizations where they are employed. They live in a mid-size midwestern city and commute to a regional campus for their education. True to adult learning principles, they typically are most engaged in the learning process when they see the relevance to their own lives. This is particularly critical when teaching a diversity course. Chan and Treacy (1996) recommend making "the issues relevant to students' own experiences and lives" (p. 220). Since the majority of our students will stay and work in this community after graduation, they want to know how diversity initiatives are being designed and implemented in companies in the vicinity.

This research project developed for two major reasons. First, to investigate local organizations' training practices to better inform our students. Second, to build on the current research examining diversity training programs. Very little empirical research has been conducted on diversity training, and most of the existing studies focus on large, multinational organizations. This exploratory research project examines the diversity training efforts of six organizations located in a mid-size midwestern city.

Theoretical Framework

While the most successful organizational diversity endeavors include multiple system wide initiatives, one of the most visible and potentially viable features of a many diversity programs is training (Arredondo, 1996; Wentling, 2002; Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 1998). Richard & Johnson (2001) argue that training and development is one of four human resource practices that are needed for an organization to have a "diversity orientation" (p. 181). Arredondo (1996) writes:

Education and training have often been considered the essence of a diversity initiative. In some organizations, they are viewed as key to changing attitudes and behavior; others view them as a way to build awareness about valuing differences (p. 125).

Several diversity experts have identified important characteristics of effective diversity training programs. For example, Ferdman & Brody (1996) provide three major reasons organizations develop diversity training: 1. to comply with moral standards, 2. to respond to legal and social pressures, and 3. to succeed in business and remain

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competitive (p. 284). Often all three of these reasons are important motivations for diversity training. Common objectives of diversity training programs include: developing awareness of diversity issues and one's feelings about diversity, disseminating information about diversity/legal issues and policies, developing skills for a diverse work environment, and applying those skills to improve or change the organizational culture (Ferdman & Brody, 1996; Holvino, Ferdman, & Merrill-Sands, 2004; Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 1998). While the content of diversity training will vary based on need, topics commonly covered include: definitions of diversity and key terms; information regarding equal opportunity laws and sexual harassment policies; explanations of prejudice, stereotyping, acculturation, and cultural differences; and obtaining "diversity-interaction skills" (Ferdman & Brody, 1996, p. 293). It is important to note that the majority of training conducted in organizations has focused on increasing employees' awareness of diversity issues.

Various prescriptions for diversity training have been offered as well. Recommendations include: developing something customized for the organization rather than using a "canned" program, ensuring that content and learning objectives are complementary, allowing sufficient time for learning to occur, using a variety of instructional methods, selecting highly skilled individuals to facilitate the training, and carefully considering the composition of the training groups (Arredondo, 1996; Cox, 2001). Other suggestions (Cox, 2001; Koonce, 2001) include getting leadership support, conducting a needs assessment, and benchmarking effective programs.

Wentling and Palma-Rivas (1998) interviewed twelve diversity experts to gather information regarding diversity issues and initiatives. One area of inquiry included the components of effective diversity training programs. The factors mentioned most frequently included: gaining commitment from upper management, including diversity training initiatives in the strategic plan, identifying training needs before development, "using qualified trainers," and combining the training with other diversity initiatives (pp. 244-245). Fifty percent of the experts interviewed also advocated making attendance at diversity training mandatory and evaluating the effectiveness of the training.

While several scholars have provided recommendations regarding essential components of diversity training, relatively little empirical work has been done examining how training is implemented in organizations, what evaluation methods are being used, and whether the training is effective. A few studies have investigated effectiveness issues. For example, some research has focused on the impact of training group composition on diversity training effectiveness (Roberson, Kulik, & Pepper, 2001) and the influence of environment factors on the transfer of training (Hanover & Cellar, 1998). In the latter study, Hanover and Cellar (1998) found that diversity training positively affected participants' perceptions of management practices related to diversity.

In addition, Wentling (2000, 2002) conducted interviews with diversity managers/directors at eight multinational companies to identify their diversity initiative evaluation processes (2000) and to investigate their perceptions of "factors that assist and barriers that hinder the success of diversity initiatives" (2002, p. 42). While these studies do provide useful information regarding how diversity training is being conducted and evaluated, most of the research has been done examining practices in large organizations. Wentling (2000) notes that all of the corporations in her study had received public recognition for their diversity practices. However, very little is known about the diversity training practices in smaller organizations.

Research Questions

Reflecting previous work by Cox (2001), Arredondo (1996), and Wentling and Palma Rivas (1998), interview questions focused on three major areas: 1) organizational definition of diversity, 2) diversity program structure (training goal and level, availability and requirements, need establishment and trainer selection), and 3) program evaluation (evaluation methods, training program strengths and limitations, and connection to other diversity initiatives). Our initial expectations were that we would find limited resources devoted to diversity training and that although diversity might be acknowledged, it would not be perceived as a pressing concern, except for legal compliance.

Methodology

This was an exploratory study. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with six individuals representing a variety of organizations. All of the study participants were involved in a significant way with diversity training in their organizations.

A total of fifteen companies were contacted to be included in the study. Companies were selected for two primary reasons: 1. the organization might have a diversity training program or 2. the organization represented one of the sectors of business we hoped to include in the research. Of the companies contacted, only seven indicated

that they currently had a diversity training program in place. Six of the seven agreed to be interviewed. Obviously a limitation of this study is the small sample. However, the organizations included in the research represent several types of industries: manufacturing, insurance, military, healthcare, government, and non-profit. The organizations range in size from approximately 3,650 employees to 154 FTEs. Two of the companies are divisions of large, multinational companies. The non-profit organization is affiliated with a national office.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face. Both researchers were present for each interview; one conducted the interview, while the other took notes. Each interview was conducted on-site at the interviewee's office. The interviews were one-two hours in length and based on fifteen pre-planned questions. Examples of questions asked of each interviewee included: How does this organization define diversity? How does the organization determine the need for diversity training? What instructional methods are used in the training? Who conducts the training? What are the strengths of the diversity training offered in this organization? Follow-up questions and/or probes were included as needed. Three of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcripts were prepared. Three interviewees did not consent to tape-recording the interviews. In these cases, notes were compiled and sent to the interviewees to verify their accuracy and completeness. No differences were perceived between the taped and non-taped interviews in regard to the openness, thoroughness, and clarity of the interviewee responses.

Five of the interviewees are female; one is male. Most of them are affiliated with the human resource function in their organizations. The exception is at the non-profit agency where we interviewed the director of the organization. One interviewee is from the corporate office of a multinational company. The HR manager of the division requested that we interview her because she, along with local facilitators, conducts all of the diversity training for the division. Two of the interviewees actually conduct most of the diversity training for their organizations. The rest of them serve as administrators of the programs.

The interview data were content analyzed by each researcher independently. Each question response was analyzed across interviews to determine patterns and themes related to the specific question. After this analysis was completed, general themes that emerged across interviews and throughout the interviews were noted as well (Creswell, 1994). The researchers then shared their findings and found no major discrepancies. Additionally, all notes and transcripts were read and analyzed by an independent researcher, not associated with this project, to control for potential bias in interpretation (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Results and Findings

Definition

All of the interviewees acknowledged a broad-based definition of diversity that includes multiple aspects of difference (i.e. gender, race, ethnicity, age, etc.) with two noting specifically that diversity included both differences and similarities. There was a variation however in how those differences were perceived. One participant clearly noted that of all aspects, they choose to focus on racism, because it is difficult to address and if people understand that, they will understand the others. She later noted that sometimes people want to put attention on types of difference that are not as difficult to deal with, but that makes the concept of diversity too soft. In contrast, another interviewee readily included geographic location and profession in listing types of differences the company recognizes, factors that many consider secondary in terms of impact on self (Loden & Rosener, 1991).

Program Structure

Goals and levels. When questioned about goals for the diversity training, participants gave multifaceted responses that reflected both pragmatic and humanitarian reasons for this endeavor, as described by Ferdman & Brody (1996). Four cited the business case as an important goal for the training, positioning the organization for success in a multicultural society. One phrased this succinctly as keeping the organization "open, competitive, and viable." Another said, "It's a customer service issue all the way around." Two interviewees included protection from liability as another goal for diversity training. Three also indicated that culture change or a better work environment is an additional goal. Several of the participants specifically indicated that enhancing awareness and understanding of diversity is a goal of their diversity training. One said, people "need to understand their own lack of awareness, to realize how ethnocentric we are and to develop methods to get out of that." However, she like the others in this study, admitted that at present, their training is limited to the awareness level rather than expanding into increased knowledge and skill building.

Availability and requirements. There is a wide variation in the amount of training available across the organizations studied. The shortest time allotment is one hour (much to the chagrin of the trainer), which limits the content to a basic introduction to diversity and why it is important to the organization. The longest is approximately eight hours, but this varied because one system measures training time in credits and while eight credits was reported as the target, there is not a credit per hour ratio established, and the other that cited a program designed for

eight hours noted that it recently has been shortened to four hours to meet scheduling demands. Other interviewees indicated four hours was a common time allotment. Just as experts vary on the wisdom of mandating diversity training for all (see for example, Wentling & Palma Rivas, 1996, Joplin & Daus, 1997), these organizations vary on requiring diversity training. Two were emphatic about mandatory training; two indicated that although diversity training is not mandatory, it is strongly encouraged and the goal is to have all employees attend; two others noted that training participation is left to the discretion of the person in charge of each work unit. The two interviewees that described their training as not mandated, but expected, represent the only organizations in this study affiliated with large multinational corporations.

Need establishment and trainer selection. When asked about how the need for diversity training was established, only one participant cited use of a formal needs assessment. One indicated it was in response to immediate needs and concerns in the system. Four of the organizations represented were prompted to implement training upon the directive of a senior staff member, illustrating the importance of leadership support to diversity initiatives (Cox, 2001).

Variations were evident regarding diversity trainers. One organization developed the program, but has it delivered by outside trainers, while another had their program designed by an outside firm, but it is facilitated by people within the organization. Two organizations use a mix of in-house trainers/facilitators and outside presenters and two rely on staff within the system for all of the training. Participants indicated that selection was based on expertise and interest in and understanding of diversity issues.

Program Evaluation

Evaluation methods. While participants acknowledged the value of training evaluation in determining the progress of diversity initiatives, they indicated that to date, their organizations had done little to quantify the value of training. Most described using participant satisfaction forms that focus primarily on trainer delivery and perceived usefulness of the session. The two representatives from multinational affiliates also outlined plans to implement additional levels of evaluation. One will be based on comparing performance data and feedback with previously collected baseline information. The other will focus on managerial perceptions of training application. Another interviewee noted that the primary metric is numbers trained, but that the system also monitors recruitment and retention data in comparison with the demographics of the community. The one organization that does not conduct any type of evaluation at this time readily indicated that is a weakness and that they are exploring ways to gather meaningful evaluative data.

Training program strengths and limitations. A common strength cited among most of the programs studied was that the training has a good reputation among recipients, often surprising them with an unexpected approach, the scope of the topics covered, and the usefulness of the information (in other words, it is a better experience than what potential trainees expect it will be). It is so well received in one organization that the representative affirmed, "It's become embedded in the organization's fabric." Two interviewees also cited the increased awareness that the training has fostered, a plus since most organizations indicated that was a training goal.

Limitations cited fell into three main categories: level, time, and support. Three interviewees acknowledged that while their current programs are well received, it is time to offer something more advanced to build beyond the awareness level and to keep employees engaged in applying what they are learning. Time concerns focused on the challenge of scheduling to accommodate other work priorities, the limited amount of time allotted for diversity training, and time to further develop the diversity curriculum. Concerns about support included lack of firm commitment from the senior staff of the organization, cited by two interviewees; as well as comments about limited staffing and money to further develop and conduct diversity training.

Connection to other initiatives. Responses varied widely regarding about how diversity training supports other initiatives in the organization. One cited programs that are only peripherally connected with diversity. Another stated that the organizational lack of support is evident in that diversity training is not included in the strategic plan or given resources to grow. At the other end of the continuum, one interviewee made the connection between diversity and the organization's leadership standards and described several human resources initiatives that are analyzed from a diversity perspective (i.e. developmental opportunities, succession plans and compensation), and another cited the racial justice aspect of diversity as being a driver in the organization. The two other participants indicated that the goal is to make diversity so much a part of the culture that it is simply embedded in the system.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As noted previously, this is a small, exploratory study. Therefore the sample size is too small for generalization of these results, but the findings reaffirm previous studies on diversity training and prepare the way for future research. Conclusions from these data suggest several interconnecting patterns. The small and mid-sized organizations

included in this study are recognizing the potential of diversity as a business imperative, even those who also cited liability protection as a secondary factor. This indicates that they have moved further along the continuum of diversity perspectives from seeing diversity as simply a legal compliance issue to recognizing it as a benefit to the organization (Dass & Parker, 1999; Joplin & Daus, 1997). The diversity training in each of the organizations remains in the awareness stage of learning, although several interviewees recognized the need to move to the next level so that trainees not only understand differences but also have sufficient knowledge and skills to apply that understanding (Cox, 2001).

The importance of leadership support for diversity initiatives (Cox, 2001) was reinforced at several points. For example, a trainer described the impact of having a senior staff member address every training session to talk about their own and the company's commitment to diversity and a non-profit director acknowledged setting the mandatory training requirements for her organization. In contrast was the trainer who fights for training time and sees no commitment from senior staff and the organization representative who noted the training had been a high priority with the previous leadership but has slipped in importance and visibility since new management has taken over. This support plays out in time and resources allotted for diversity training and in how much people are urged, if not required, to attend.

One way to reinforce the value of any endeavor is to evaluate its effectiveness. Unlike the large companies Wentling (2000) describes that use multiple methods to measure the impact of diversity training, most of the organizations in this study currently limit their evaluation to participant satisfaction forms. However, two interviewees described specific plans for performance-based measures to determine how training affects performance and two others expressed interest in developing a more meaningful way to assess the effect of diversity training on the organization. The connection between organizational commitment to diversity and measurement of results (Arredondo, 1996; Cox, 2001) reinforces the importance of devoting time and attention to evaluation efforts of diversity training if programs are going to not simply survive but evolve and expand into greater depths of learning.

While all of the persons interviewed for this study expressed interest in diversity and clearly recognized the value of diversity training in making their organizations more viable, a difference in personal styles and investment in the topic was evident. Three of the participants can best be described as being passionate about diversity, readily acknowledging that it is of great importance to them personally and is an integral part of who they are and how they approach their work. They interjected personal anecdotes into their responses to questions and readily disclosed their feelings about diversity and their own commitment to helping people "get it." One in particular talked about progress that has been made in the organization, but followed that with the telling statement, "I'm never satisfied with what we do, we never do enough." Each touched on the importance of engaging the individual as well as clarifying the business case at an organizational level, and made comments like "how do you engage the soul?" of trainees so they truly understand what this is about. One expressed her concern that some diversity training is too soft, that it does not challenge people to address the really difficult issues, like racism, for example, because trainers want the training to be palatable to the audience. This is in contrast with another interviewee who described the organization's efforts to use a "balanced, tempered approach" so that trainees feel good about diversity and the training session when they leave.

Certainly, one of the purposes of an exploratory study is to suggest additional avenues for research. This study indicates that there is much more to learn about diversity training in small and mid-sized organizations that recognize the moral and business implications of a global society and shifting demographics but that may lack the resources of larger companies. It is not uncommon for the biggest organizations to pioneer new organizational initiatives and set precedents for others to benchmark, but it is important to consider how those endeavors can be adapted to organizational systems that operate on a small scale. Studies that will assist smaller firms both to move beyond the awareness stage of training and to formulate more meaningful measurements for evaluating the performance value of diversity training are needed. Questions to be explored include: How to connect diversity initiatives more directly with organizational goals? How to evaluate the value added of diversity training to organizational productivity? What types of diversity training will help organizations move beyond the awareness stage into more advanced levels of implementation? How do organizational systems reinforce or hinder transfer of diversity training?

Implications for HRD

This study taps into some of the traditional struggles of the human resource development function. Training programs often are given tacit approval by upper management, but not supported with strong leadership commitment or with the resources needed to foster growth. Like some of the diversity training endeavors cited in

this study, training initiatives frequently are seen as set aside programs that are not linked with the mission or the strategic plan of the organization, leaving them vulnerable to changes in leadership and complicating efforts to foster transfer of training and to evaluate organizational impact. One of the interviewees likened the current interest in diversity initiatives to earlier efforts to adopt a quality mindset, noting it is high profile and provided with resources at first, then it either becomes embedded into the culture or it is abandoned. Projections strongly indicate that the forces prompting globalization and demographic changes will continue for the foreseeable future (Judy & D'Amico, 1997). Diversity is therefore an inevitable part of HRD's future.

An additional implication for AHRD stems from the one of the initial reasons for this study, preparing students to work in a multicultural society and providing them with information about the workplace that is current, accurate, and applicable. The results of this study reinforce the viability of diversity initiatives in an area that is just beginning to experience demographic changes in its workforce and customer base. Further, they reveal that these small to mid-sized organizations use models for diversity training similar to those employed in larger systems. Certainly, students can learn from case studies about Fortune 500 firms, but the most powerful reference typically brings the real world into the classroom in a more personal way. Theory, no matter how well documented, makes more of an impression when students can envision it applied in their own lives. Just as the interviewees in this study and diversity researchers (Arredondo, 1996; Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 1998) cite the importance of customizing training programs to their employees and responding to their needs, applying diversity theory into small and mid-sized firms that students recognize reinforces the value of their learning and gives them a realistic job preview.

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