

Diversity is More Than a Training Program

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The concept of accepting others in the workplace, while providing fair and equitable treatment for all is not new. For decades there has been legislation enacted in various countries throughout the world to ensure that people of various groups are afforded the rights and opportunities that in effect should be common practice.

The challenge is that when you put two people together, there is an opportunity for misunderstanding, distrust, and conflict because of differing backgrounds, beliefs, and values. These potential clashes can lead to serious problems for organizations, employees and customers if not identified, prevented, or reduced before they manifest themselves.

Typical Diversity Initiatives

Many organizations offer diversity awareness training to staff members and, in some cases, to customers. Often these programs are as a result of some sort of inappropriate action or treatment by someone within the organization or because there is fear of legal action. Unfortunately, many of these training programs are just that --- a one-time program. For such initiatives to be effective there must be a total integration of the concepts presented in the program into the culture of the organization. There must also be true buy-in at every level of the organization, starting with senior management. The goal of diversity initiatives should not be to simply satisfy legal requirements. Instead, the programs should be developed and presented because it is the right thing to do. They should be part of an effort to better encourage understanding and tolerance and to improve interpersonal interactions.

The Challenges of Diversity Training

One of the biggest challenges for an organization considering diversity initiatives is to decide what the goals or outcomes are to be. Certainly awareness and education about the various aspects of diversity are a good starting point, however, there should be more.

A true diversity process involves first defining diversity. Too many people view diversity as strictly a color- or culture-based issue. These facets are certainly two of the most visible of diversity; however, they represent only part of the picture. Diversity is anything that makes people unique and at the same time similar. Diversity factors include such things as age, physical and mental state, education, marital status, behavioral style preference, shoe size, height, weight, hair and eye color, sexual orientation, whether they a person is an only child or one of a dozen, and on so on. Each of these factors may be different, but they

are also similar to those of other people with whom a person comes into contact throughout any given day.

Once a definition of the issue has been established, an organization must then scrutinize its infrastructure --- the policies, procedures, performance management, reward systems, and support systems (e.g. reference library, coaching and mentoring follow-up). These must complement any diversity training done by the organization. They must also comply with current law. Next, all the background pieces are in place; the organization must carefully choose whom it will use to facilitate any training and the methods to be used in it. When selecting an individual or organization to lead the training initiative, it is crucial to ensure that experience and knowledge of diversity is present and matches the needs of the organization and audience. Generally having two facilitators of diverse backgrounds (e.g. color, gender, sexual orientation, and culture) is preferable to a single person who has only one perspective or life experience. Whether an internal or external person is chosen depends on the background of the facilitator(s) and the goals of the program. Often, an outside expert brings more credibility and breadth of knowledge and experience than an internal person (but not always).

After selection of the facilitator(s), the next major step is to determine what will be presented. An interactive program tapping into the knowledge and experience of participants is often helpful and desirable. Caution must be used with any activities and discussion to ensure that they are done in a way that is not threatening, judgmental, intimidating, or discriminatory. This is where the skill and expertise of the facilitator is invaluable. Additionally, content should address various facets of diversity from the standpoint of communication, behavioral styles, and backgrounds. This is because; based on different cultural backgrounds and other diversity factors (e.g. physical and mental abilities), activities and information must be tailored to the learners. For example, some cultures stress respect and acceptance of an instructor's statements more than others where people are taught early in school to challenge thinking and ask questions. Additionally, some people prefer didactic learning methods and working in dyads or triads to discuss and explore concepts. Others might prefer to have information provided for them or to see demonstrations that they then diagnose and assimilate individually. Even the way in which questions are asked could get a different reaction based on learner background and preference.

Enhancing Success

Just as diversity is not easy to pinpoint and pigeonhole, the same is true of how to address it in a learning environment. The key is to keep an open mind, provide an ongoing process of information and support, and give employees an opportunity to access the information at their own pace and as they prefer. Finally, benchmarking against what other successful organizations have done is also a big help in ensuring success.

Diversity is a complex subject, however, if handled correctly can provide many positive returns.

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