

Workplace Diversity Is No Longer Black and White

By Jennifer Gottlieb



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When it comes to cultural diversity, the issues aren't just black and white. Gender, age, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status have joined race as growing considerations in the workplace. Dealing with difference can be complicated in creating a conscientious corporate culture, and, by nature, no two approaches are exactly alike. Professionals agree, however, that with mergers and organizational restructuring on the rise, there is a greater need for diversity training and development.

"Living in a global society, we need diversity at the decision making level to help us stay competitive," says Dani Monroe, president of Center Focus International, a consulting firm in Boston specializing in change management. The challenge, she says, is getting those different voices into the conversations. Monroe acknowledges that while numbers may indicate there are more women and people of color in the workplace than ever before, those numbers can be deceiving since the majority of leadership positions are still held by white males. In New England, for example, women occupy only 7.4 percent of board seats among public companies, according to the Boston Consulting Group.

Katharine Esty, Ph.D., says the biggest challenge she faces in her work as an organizational consultant is getting people to accept diversity management as a legitimate issue. "The good news is that I find more

and more organizations committed to bringing women to the top, and many senior managers are open to promoting change," says Esty, President of Cambridge-based Ibis Consulting Group, Inc. "The bad news is that people dramatically underestimate what it takes to change a culture, and that simply changing your recruiting habits isn't enough." The real answers, she says, lie in a long-term commitment to identifying and implementing necessary change.

To do this, consultants work with management teams to conduct an assessment of the organization that includes asking the tough questions, such as "How many women, ethnicities, people with disabilities, etc. are represented in leadership positions?" "What about retention rates?" "Is there high turnover among one particular population?" and "What does it really take to get ahead here?"

Ways to Support Diversity

- Orientation programs
- Training programs
- Decision-making
- Performance appraisal systems
- Feedback and coaching
- Work assignment processes
- Career development systems
- Rewards and recognition
- Recruitment and hiring
- Planning process

From "Workplace Diversity: A Manager's Guide to Solving Problems and Turning Diversity into a Competitive Advantage."
By Katharine Esty, Richard Griffin and Marcie Schorr Hirsch.

At the same time, smaller focus groups often indicate what is at issue for a particular company. Face-to-face meetings with groups defined by race, gender or executive level encourage dialogue and present rare opportunities to talk openly and honestly about the challenges presented by the company's existing paradigm. Esty calls this "The Diversity Audit." In addition to revealing organizational practices and policies, these assessments increase awareness of diversity issues and often create a much-needed commitment to change. Esty takes the information and develops a series of recommendations, working with a steering committee of people from across the company to determine a course of action and move forward. Often it is the feedback from the focus groups that is the biggest catalyst for change. "When people hear about the experience of others, the information can sometimes be troubling," says Esty. "It's uncomfortable to see the level of exclusion out there." For this reason, she often includes comments word for word in her reports, which, she says, helps decision-makers think about the impact of these issues on the business. Esty and her colleagues cite a new area of focus: retention. This is one area that is easily quantified, and sometimes attaching a price to a practice inspires a change for the better. By responding to needs that emerged from its assessment, one of Esty's clients lowered its turnover rate from 12 percent to 9 percent, resulting in savings of more than \$2 million. "Many people see diversity work as a touchy-feely thing," Monroe says, "when it's really about business. And as much as business is about doing deals, or products and services, or finance, it's also about the human experience."

Dr. Patricia Arredondo agrees. "A diversity awareness program can help us examine our learned behavior, and find ways to modify it in order to make the workplace a more comfortable and

stable environment for other people as well as ourselves," says the organizational consultant, educator and president of Empowerment Workshops Inc., Boston. She recommends holding people accountable for their actions with rewards for good work and positive diversity management - as well as for consequences of poor practices.

"You can't go after attitudes. You have to go after behavior," Arredondo says, pointing out that attitudes get shaped early on, and though they may change over time, behavior is more easily modified, "If you want to introduce change, it's all about how it gets modeled by management." In her work, Arredondo discusses the importance of what she calls "role taking," and finding ways to see ourselves as others see us. But she also knows that that perspective is not always easy to come by. "Unless we have some kind of mirror before us, we don't really know what it is we need to modify," she says. So Arredondo works with business leaders to bridge the gap between perception and reality. Helping people think about what they consider to be the issues and comparing that with what others perceive as the issues can lead organizations to make some changes. Arredondo, Esty and Monroe agree that things are changing: From images found in advertising campaigns to the increasing number of bilingual signs in airports and other public places, there seems to be a greater awareness that there are many different people doing many different things. Business executives are more attune to what this means for the workplace, and have begun to accept that diversity management is not simply a legal obligation - it is a way to keep people productive, maximize efficiency and better the bottom line.

Monroe talks about the satisfaction that comes from creating a dialogue about issues that have traditionally scared people off. "As the world

becomes more aware of the issues," she says, "we are redefining our thinking and moving away from dynamics that can be destructive." But she admits that while, in theory, the most rewarding thing she and other diversity consultants could do is put themselves out of business, there is still a way to go before the spirit of inclusion is as much a part of corporate consciousness as customer service. And until then, she encourages business leaders to look beyond the quick fix. Most important, she says, people need to have a clear understanding of what it means to create a "culturally competent" workplace.

"A commitment to diversity isn't about treating everyone the same," Monroe says, countering one of the biggest misconceptions about this issue. "But it is about giving everyone the same opportunities."

Jennifer Gottlieb, principal of JNG Communications Cambridge, is a writer and consultant specializing in public relations and marketing.

Keep in Mind.....

1. Diversity is a process, not an event. There is no quick fix.
2. Treat diversity like any business initiative. Define the goals, provide appropriate resources and measure the benefits.
3. Diversity is about inclusion. Too often, diversity programs focus only on specific groups of people, though good diversity management is about the success of all employees.
4. Dialogue is a key ingredient to successful diversity programs. It must continue long after a formal process is complete.
5. Managers should be accountable for promoting a diverse work force. Tying performance in this area to compensation has resulted in striking turnarounds for some corporations.
6. What you can measure, you can change: Set goals and invest in both qualitative and quantitative data collection.
7. A successful diversity effort requires access to and attention from above. CEO involvement sends a strong message throughout the corporation that this is an important issue.