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## Some Essentials of Diversity in the Workplace

Robin Williams

This article presents selected concepts in support of diversity in the workplace and the elements of the processes that lead to success in implementing diversity training programs within a multiculturally diverse workplace. Diversity training requires an appreciation for change and ought to be viewed as a resource within every company (Hendricks, 1991). This is closely connected with the fact that America's workforce is changing. By 2050, the African American population in the United States is expected to nearly double to more than 61 million people. Every year from now to 2050, the Hispanic-origin ethnic group will add the largest number of people to the U.S. population under age 18 (Bell, 1999).

### The Why and What of Diversity in the Workplace

McEnrue (1992) observed that managing diversity can serve as a source of competitive advantage for a firm in six ways: (a) by reducing costs associated with excessive turnover and absenteeism, (b) by making it easier to recruit scarce labor, (c) by increasing sales to members of minority culture groups, (d)

by promoting team creativity and innovation, (e) by improving problem solving, and (f) by enhancing organizational flexibility.

As the workforce changes, there is an increasing demand for companies and managers to be more sensitive to cultural diversity. Technology is available to everyone today, so what really makes a difference to an organization is people and how effective they are in maximizing their potential (Bell, 1999). Facilitating diversity does not mean focusing only on the needs of minority employees. Rather, managing diversity is getting all employees to perform to their potential by tapping the potential of all workforce members. Facilitating diversity does not mean simply being anti-White male, for example. It means accepting the range of variations among persons by virtue of their age, education, social class background, job function, and personality style. The goal of diversity is not to assimilate women and minorities into a dominant White male culture, but to create a heterogeneous organizational milieu (Thomas, 1990).

Thomas (1990) explained that managing diversity is creating an

environment that allows access to the talent of people who are increasingly diverse. In this type of environment, people would feel free to behave differently as a result of their ethnic differences (Comeau-Kirschner, 1999). Effective management of a diverse workforce translates into bottom-line results. Diverse groups tend to be more creative problem solvers when their differences in background and perspective are all brought to bear. Diverse companies, therefore, have the potential to be more innovative (Kuczynski, 1999).

According to Thomas (1990), the traditional American image of diversity has been assimilation: the melting pot, where ethnic and racial differences were standardized into a kind of American puree. Of course, the melting pot is only a metaphor. In real life, many ethnic and most racial groups retain their individuality and express it energetically. What we have is perhaps some kind of American mulligan stew; it is certainly no puree. At the workplace, however, the melting pot has been more than a metaphor. Corporate success has demanded a good deal of conformity,

and employees have voluntarily abandoned most of their ethnic distinctions at the company door. Now those days are over. Today the melting pot is distinguishable broth; you can't do the same with Blacks, Asians, and women. Their differences don't melt so easily. Second, most people are no longer willing to be melted down, not even for eight hours a day. Third, the thrust of today's nonhierarchical, flexible, collaborative management requires a 10- or 20-fold increase in our tolerance for individuality (Thomas, 1990, p.112).

#### Accepting the Concept of Diversity

A simple probe to discern the existence of a diversity effort is: Does this program, policy, or principle give special consideration to one group or to everyone's success? If the answer is one group, diversity is not being facilitated; if all employees are assisted, diversity is enhanced (Thomas, 1990).

The path to cultural enlightenment moves through six stages. The basic movements are from stage one "denial" and rigidly maintaining a belief system that there are no differences between cultures. Individuals who feel threatened by cultural differences are in the stage two "defense." "Minimizers" are at stage three and believe that cultural differences are only superficial—that we all are basically "the same." Individuals in the fourth stage demonstrate "acceptance" that there are differences between cultural groups and they welcome the opportunity to learn of other's preferred communication and behavioral styles. Being able to understand different frames of reference in the sense of an ability to "walk in another's shoes" is the fifth stage, "adaptation." "Integrators" at the last stage have incorporated the values and mores of more than one culture, and they have developed a dual or multiple identity (Bennett, 1986; Bergh, 1991).

#### Achieving and Managing Diversity

CEOs of high profile firms such as Avon, Xerox, Corning, and Procter and Gamble have said that managing

diversity is "not simply something to do because it's nice." Rather, it is a "competitive necessity," a "business imperative," a "strategic priority" (McEnrue, 1992). In a survey of 27 companies, *Work* newsletter found that most of the companies have employee diversity groups, often instituted as part of recruitment and retention strategies ("Survey Looks at Workplace," 1999). Diversity groups are sometimes called affinity groups, networks, or identity groups and are formed on the employee level. Study findings include that 74% of the respondents had diversity groups, while the other 26% either did not have groups or were considering them. Respondents with diversity groups included Microsoft, Intel, and Procter and Gamble. Seventy-five percent of respondents said that their employee groups contributed to diversity initiatives with their companies ("Survey Looks at Workplace," 1999).

To manage diversity, some companies encourage small group discussion. The small group process is frequently used in interracial discussion sessions that can enhance cross-cultural communication and acceptance. A belief in sharing responsibility for change is also promoted so that, for example, English-speaking employees should be as willing to acquire facility in speaking Spanish as Hispanic employees should be responsible to learn English. Included also is awareness training to encourage individuals to acknowledge how their stereotypes can impact decision-making actions toward others (Nelton, 1998). In order for those in positions of authority to "walk the talk," and to avoid unintentional discrimination, they must ask themselves the following questions: Am I considering all of our talent in hiring, promotions, and project assignments? Whom do we consider high-potential? Who is being promoted? Do we tell employees not on our high-potential list how to improve? (DeVoe, 1999).

Managing diversity also means creating a corporate environment where women, Blacks, and other non-traditional employees can flourish. And

diversity itself can be a source of strength (Konrad, 1990). According to *Business Week's* "Best Companies for Women" (Konrad, 1990), the following companies are pacesetters in the race to employ a "woman-friendly culture" within their companies: Avon, CBS, Dayton-Hudson, Gannett, Kelly Services, and U.S. West.

Following are some of the actions that companies have taken to manage diversity:

*Avon* initiated awareness training at all levels. "The key to recruiting, retaining, and promoting minorities is not the human resource department, its getting line management to buy into the idea. We had to do more than change behavior. We had to change attitudes" (Thomas, 1990, p. 108). *Avon* formed a Multicultural Participation Council that meets regularly to oversee the process of managing diversity, and in conjunction with American Institute for Managing Diversity, *Avon* developed a diversity training program. Finally, *Avon* helped three minority groups—Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians—form networks that crisscrossed the corporation in all 50 states. Each network elects its own leaders and has an adviser for senior management. In addition, the networks have representatives on the Multicultural Participation Council, where they serve as a conduit for employee views on diversity issues facing management.

*Corning's* CEO James R. Houghton views managing diversity as "simply making good business sense" (Thomas, 1990, p. 110). Under his leadership *Corning* has expanded its summer intern program, with an emphasis on minorities and women, and established formal recruiting contacts with campus groups such as the Society for Women Engineers and the National Black MBA Association. *Corning* sees its efforts to manage diversity not only as a social and moral issue, but as a question of efficiency and competitiveness.

*Digital* established a resulting program and philosophy, called Valuing Differences, which has two components:

(1) There are voluntary groups with a trained facilitator to help people get in touch with their stereotypes and false assumptions, which Digital calls Core Groups. (2) Digital, has named a number of senior managers to various Cultural Boards of Directors and Valuing Differences Boards of Directors. These bodies promote openness to individual differences, encourage younger managers committed to the goal of diversity, and sponsor frequent

celebrations of racial, gender, and ethnic differences such as Hispanic Heritage Week and Black History Month. Digital wants to be the employer of choice. (Thomas, 1990, p. 111)

The need for companies to establish some type of diversity management is essential to maintaining a productive workplace in the 21st century. Companies are being forced to deal with employee relations or simply lose customers and thus profits. The overall

consensus of many organizations about diversity management is that it's not established out of legal obligation or altruism, but bottom-line common sense (Konrad, 1990).

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