
Cracking the Diversity Code

by Lynne Eisaguirre

Many organizations struggle with the issue of diversity training and how to sort through the muddle of conflicting advice about this charged subject in 2008. Some surrender in confusion after a bad experience. Such an approach is unfortunate and unnecessary. Good diversity training is both crucial and possible. What are the benefits of good diversity training? Some include:

- Reducing the costs of employment litigation and ensuring compliance with EEO and harassment prevent laws
- Increased productivity through better teamwork and understanding and appreciating differences
- Increased morale during tough times in a tight labor market
- Aligning employees with business goals.

How do you accomplish these benefits? By following a few simple guidelines.

Take a Staged Approach

Diversity is not an *event* it is a *process*. Success requires a staged approach.

The first stage should be what I call “Fair, Square and Legal.” The law sets a floor for your behavior at work. Below that floor lies what I call the red zone.

Most organizations have policies that set a higher floor. At a higher level still, for

most organizations, is their own values, such as treating people with respect and dignity.

Many times an organization will come to me and say that they want to do diversity training but when I speak with them, I find that they haven't educated their employees about the laws and their organization's policies. Without setting that floor, and making sure that employees understand that the organization will enforce the laws and policies, they're simply not ready for what they might think is traditional diversity training.

Stage Two: Understanding and Appreciating Differences

Most people, when they speak about diversity training, are actually discussing this stage. But what's necessary is to make sure that you've set a strong foundation first through Stage I. At Stage II, you should focus on values and implementing what I call the platinum rule.

Many people, when asked how they should treat others in the workplace mention the golden rule: treat others the way that you would want to be treated. The problem in a diverse workplace is that we can't assume that we know how others want to be treated. So instead of the golden rule, we emphasize the platinum rule: treat others the way *they* want to be treated.

This requires us to find out, of course, how people want to be treated. Good

Stage II diversity training gives people the skills they need to do this and they

should also complete the training with the ability to understand and appreciate differences.

Stage Three: The Business Advantage of Diversity

In this stage you're integrating your diversity goals with the goals of the business: to drive business success by using diversity to help identify new areas of creativity, productivity and innovation. Studies show that diverse organizations, if their employees have been trained to work well with differences, are more creative than those who are more homogeneous.

Since both the potential employee pool and most markets are increasingly diverse, educating current employees about this fact helps drive business success.

Focus on Behavior, Not Attitudes

Some diversity training – especially in the past -- has focused on changing people's attitudes. This approach ultimately fails and can also be coercive in the workplace. Instead, focus on how people behave at work: behaviors you can actually see or hear them do. You are not the thought police. Employees' attitudes are private but how they behave at work is your business. Provide lots of interactive examples of behavior that exhibits understanding and appreciating differences, as well as behavior that will not be tolerated by the organization.

Leadership and Modeling

Treat diversity as a leadership issue. Stress to your managers and executives that you expect them to assume leadership when managing diversity issues.

Reward good role modeling on this issue. Use diverse training teams to provide positive examples of diversity.

Good diversity management skills improve leaders' management ability in other ways.

Summary

Navigating diversity issues need not feel like an impossible minefield if you follow a few guidelines:

1. Take it in stages;
2. Focus on behavior, not attitudes and
3. Present positive role models of diversity as a leadership opportunity.

These three keys will ensure that your diversity training succeeds.