Diversity: Myths vs. Facts
by Lynne Eisaguirre

Today, most human resource professionals recognize the need for diversity efforts. Many find, however, that managers and employees believe "diversity myths." These beliefs may hinder efforts to foster diversity programs. Here are some quick answers to these common myths.

Myth #1: Fostering diversity means lowering performance standards.
Fact: Every employee should be required to meet reasonable, job-related performance standards. Yet many organizations have standards that have nothing to do with performance, and may in fact inhibit performance. For example, a company might require all employees to work certain hours, rather than defining the job which needs to be done and judging performance by accomplishment, not hours. Time-only standards can limit the success of employees who have work/family conflicts and who might thrive with more flexible schedules.

Myth #2: A diverse workforce creates conflicts and interferes with productivity.
Fact: Many studies have shown that well-trained, diverse workplaces are more creative, and ultimately more productive, than workforces that are more homogeneous. Diverse management teams may also sell more successfully in a global marketplace and attract the best candidates from an increasingly diverse pool of employee applicants. Training on team-building and respecting differences is necessary, however, to achieve the highest level of productivity with a diverse group.

Myth #3: White men are left out of diversity efforts or blamed for all kinds of problems.
Fact: A good diversity program should be inclusive and should recognize and celebrate differences that go beyond race and gender. A single white male, for example, might be the sole caretaker for aging parents and may need a manager sensitive to diversity issues in order to achieve his potential at work while taking care of his responsibilities to his family. In addition, the new workforce demographics tell the story of change. Diversity efforts can help everyone, including white males, deal with change in a positive manner and learn new skills to succeed in the next century.

Myth #4: Diversity efforts create even worse stereotypes and lead to divisiveness.
Fact: Good diversity training alerts us all to the biases and prejudices that we each have and helps people recognize that no one likes to be stereotyped. Good diversity training helps fuel productive partnerships at work by uncovering these biases in a safe environment and emphasizes concrete skill-building exercises to help people learn to work with different people.

Myth #5: Diversity training is confrontational or boring.
Fact: You should select a training group that takes a nonconfrontational, inclusive approach and provides a friendly, lively environment for learning.

Myth #6: New laws and attitudes toward affirmative action will eliminate the need for diversity efforts.
Fact: Regardless of how the current affirmative action debate is resolved, numerous laws banning discrimination will remain on the books. In addition, our country's changing demographics and the move toward a global economy will require all of us to learn how to work with, and sell to, different kinds of people.

Lynne Eisaguirre is an attorney and president of Workplaces That Work®, a training company specializing in diversity, sexual harassment, and preventing workplace violence and conflict. She conducts diversity trainings in conjunction with Anderson-Davis, Inc. and is the author of Sexual Harassment: A Reference Handbook.