

A few thoughts about diversity training...

By Joe Gerstandt



Expert Forum



I came across yet another article recently questioning the value of diversity training, and I always find the responses to these articles interesting, but I also find the articles themselves to be interesting in the way in which they hold diversity training up to standards that I do not see applied to other bodies of content.

A quick disclaimer...

Most of my work involves developing and delivering diversity and inclusion workshops for client organizations...so I have my own biases about this topic.

Having said that...

I personally am not a big fan of 90% of the diversity and inclusion training that I have personally attended...I have my own set of issues with this body of work that I am a part of. I have at times seen mediocre facilitation, an absence of foundational research and evidence, and shoddy instructional framework. I have also seen these same things in leadership training...in new employee orientation...in communication training...in change management training, and every other kind of training or development that I have participated in over the years.

A few of the stones commonly thrown at diversity training...

That there are a wide variety of definitions and approaches, rather than a unified model. Ummm, yeah. The exact same thing can be said about leadership training...and new employee orientation...and communication training...and change management training. This does not mean that there is anything wrong with diversity training, though I appreciate the fact that it makes it more difficult to compare and measure them. From my perspective, conformity is greatly overrated...unless you are the institution that wants to sell the “certifications.”

That it is difficult or impossible to measure actual causation in relation to business outcomes. Umm, yeah. The exact same thing can be said about leadership training...and new employee orientation...and communication training...and change management training. If we are ready to be honest with ourselves we can almost never prove causation in the workplace...again, this does not mean that there is anything wrong with diversity training or that this is unique to diversity training.

That diversity training does not lead to any observable change (workforce demographics, employee engagement or satisfaction, etc.). The exact same thing can be said about leadership training...and new employee orientation...and communication training...and change management training. Regardless of what you are trying to change, training should only be one component of a comprehensive investment. Unless your “change” is teaching employees how to

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use Excel...then training alone might do it. The idea of isolating diversity training out by itself to determine if it “works” or not ignores the complexity, the interrelatedness and the uniqueness of organizational culture and ecology. It is not terribly different from yanking my liver out of my body to determine if it “works” or not. A lone liver lying on my kitchen table is of no value, but the right liver in the right body can make all the difference in the world.

I could go on and on because I spend a lot of time talking and thinking about this, but I will spare you that.

Again, I think that those of us that are practitioners of this craft have a great and profound responsibility to make sure that our programs are evidence-based, logically sound, actionable, relevant and engaging...and we can do better.

There is always going to be a variety of definitions, frameworks and approaches to this work and that is okay. **That is actually a good thing.** This body of work sits at the intersection of many fields of work and research; adult learning, group dynamics, communication, social psychology, branding, workforce demographics, employee engagement, innovation, organizational development, leadership development, neuroscience, anthropology, sociology and on and on. That loud, noisy, beautiful intersection is always going to generate a lot of different approaches.

You can find the approach that works for your organization. **You have choices.** If you get bad diversity training (or any kind of training), then do a better job of finding the approach and the practitioner that works for you. A lot of people have had a bad experience, I get that. But having a bad experience and diagnosing an entire body of work based on that experience is simply not good logic and simply not something that we are in the habit of doing with leadership training or management training or other types of training.

You should ask for references, you should ask about the objectives of the training and what models and what research it is informed by...as you should anytime you bring an outside perspective in, regardless of the content area. **And...you should understand why you are doing it.**

It is true that diversity training is in some significant ways different from (most) leadership training or new employee orientations or workshops on teamwork. It deals with a set of issues that we are collectively still very dysfunctional about.

There is going to be some discomfort, there is going to be some

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awkwardness. But if you are hiring people that embrace your organizational values and you are providing diversity training informed by those values then it should be a healthy and engaging experience despite some discomfort. **But the reality is that being inclusive is hard work.** That's why it is so rare.

And finally I say this regarding diversity training. **Stop doing it for the wrong reasons.** Stop doing it because you are concerned about perceptions, because that is not likely to lead you to pick the right solution or generate the right outcomes. I would suggest that a great many organizations sabotage their own investments in diversity training (regardless of the quality of the training) because they have not gotten clear on what it is and why it matters for them.

If you understand what diversity and inclusion really mean, and they are in alignment with what your organization claims to be about, then diversity and inclusion training (as part of a comprehensive investment) is a no brainer. And if you understand what diversity and inclusion really mean, and they are in alignment with what your organization claims to be about **then you will have some real clarity on why you are doing it and that will increase the likelihood that you pick the right practitioner with the right approach and get the right outcomes.**

Diversity and inclusion training can work; it can make a powerful and valuable contribution to individual awareness and competencies as well as organizational culture.

For me, what does not work are articles that take a simple approach to a complex and evolving body of work, especially when they rarely do the same thing to similar types of individual and organizational development domains.

Be bold and be good to each other.