

Doing Diversity In Tough Economic Times

5 Ways to Keep Your Diversity Initiative Alive

By William (Bill) Shackelford



We all know the story. First the housing market collapsed; which impacted the financial markets; which impacted the stock market. This current economic crisis has impacted every sector of the U.S. economy (both public and private). During tough economic times, organizations are forced to focus on their “core business”. Projects (like diversity) that reside in their support area may be delayed or cut – often with trepidation about the potential impact delay will have on efforts to build an inclusive culture.

Several of my clients have expressed concerns about having to delay their diversity initiatives with the refrain “What choice do I have?” What I have been doing is giving them choices for “doing diversity” in these tough economic times.

My advice to organizations with a thriving (or budding) diversity initiative is that “you cannot afford to let it die”. If you allow your organizational culture to slip backward, it will cost you today in loss productivity and lost personnel – at the very time when you must get more out of every employee. Also, in the long term it will cost you by making it more difficult to recruit the talent you need for the future. Finally, you will find yourself spending money re-doing diversity initiatives just to get your culture back to where it was. However, you do have alternatives.

Here are 5 ways you can keep your diversity initiative alive.

1. Use Your Diversity Council To Keep the Topic Alive.

If you have a diversity council that has been in existence for a while, they probably have accumulated lots of information, data, and statistics on diversity. Ask them to produce a series of articles on diversity and inclusion for distribution to all employees. This will keep the council members engaged during this period of low activity and allow them to keep the diversity issue alive in your organization.

2. Retain A Diversity Consultant

Diversity consulting firms also have been impacted by the economic crises. Many are looking for work to fill days left open due to cancellations and/or delays by their clients. Right now you can negotiate excellent deals with the top diversity consulting firms.

Consider negotiating a **Retainer Agreement** whereby – for a fixed monthly fee – the firm is available to support your diversity needs. You can include in the agreement general consulting, training support and other mutually agreed upon activities. In addition, this might be the ideal time to have an expert diversity consultant work with your diversity council to develop a new strategic direction for your diversity initiative – one that takes into account the new economic realities.

3. Use On-line Training Tools

As opposed to delaying or canceling training initiatives, use technology to drastically reduce the cost of training. For example, Inscape Publishing Company has developed excellent, low cost on-line instruments that 1) enhance the learning experience; and 2) standardize the learnings. Topics covered include diversity and inclusion, communication skills, conflict management, listening skills, teambuilding, stress management, time management and others.¹

Most Inscape instruments cost about \$30/person. The DiSC (behavioral) instrument is their most popular. My personal favorites are their Team Dimensions (teambuilding) and Discovering Diversity instruments. A complete list of instruments and training topics covered can be found at <http://www.iecenterprises.com/inscape.html>.

4. Invest in Selected Leaders

If you have a manager over a work group (department, division, etc.) that has a high turnover rate or documented low morale, you may be able to address both issues by providing that manager diversity, communication skills, leadership or other training. Improving his/her leadership style and management skills will have a cascading effect on the entire group – multiplying the impact of the investment in that manager.

5. Conduct “Single Issue” Assessments

We have conducted detailed cultural audits for numerous public and private sector clients over the years. These are extensive studies that last 4-6 month. However, if you have identified a single issue that is causing stress in the workplace, it may be feasible to conduct a “mini-assessment” around that issue with a minimum financial investment.

We recently conducted a 3 day assessment for a client on how they could address the issue of rising fuel cost (gasoline) for their employees. We conducted focus groups with their employees and provided the client written and oral reports of the suggestions they offered. The client got just what they needed – solid solutions at an affordable price. In addition, they got accolades from the employees who were delighted by the fact that their

¹ IEC Enterprises is an authorized distributor of Inscape Publishing Company learning instruments. Additional information – including descriptions of the profiles – can be found on our website at <http://www.iecenterprises.com/inscape.html>.

employer asked their opinion and got them involved in managing that pressing issue. The company's actions signaled to employees that they are still "their most valued resource".

Despite all of the economic turmoil facing the workforce – or even because of the turmoil – there is a need for employers to maintain a strong focus on diversity. Now is the time to invest smartly in diversity.

About the Author

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