

Managing Bias: The Key Component of Corporate Culture Change



By *Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.*

Many of your colleagues, you may have noticed, are tired of hearing the phrase "workplace diversity." They have come to see respond to the topic as if it were nothing more than a buzzword designed to sell books, market consultants, and promote hours of expensive training. Unfortunately, this attitude is nothing new. Since its inception, the diversity movement has been in an uphill battle to gain credence as a key component of culture change in the 21st century.

Plagued by exaggerated claims, soft terminology – "sensitivity" being the chief culprit – and hard-to-measure benefits such as "increased creativity," it is understandable that many organizations have resisted embracing diversity. Fortunately, those days are numbered. Prompted by a struggling economy and recent backlash against Affirmative Action, diversity professionals have been forced, not to change their goals, but to reposition their efforts so that the benefits are better understood and the monetary and emotional costs more palatable.

A quick look around renders the benefits of diversity obvious. The global economy and diverse consumer base means that increased workforce diversity can only result in a better understanding of the 21st century customer. Fortunately, the labor pool is becoming increasingly diverse so the resources are there to meet this changing need. The purpose of diversity programs is to create corporate cultures in which all employees – regardless of the demographic group to which they belong – feel valued and comfortable and, in turn, function most productively. In short, we need diversity if we are to succeed at business in the decades to come.

The question then becomes: How do we bring about this diversity-friendly culture change? Clearly there are many elements to this process: Executive support, training, mentoring programs, succession planning are just a few of the many approaches that must be taken. None of these, however, will have much affect if we neglect one essential step. We must become aware of the subtle biases that continue to plague even the most innovative of organizations. It is these biases that leave us as individuals, and our companies as corporate entities, incapable of making the most of our workforces. As long as the issue of bias remains unaddressed, other efforts at culture change will fail.

Defined as "an inflexible belief about a particular category of people," bias is found within us all. The bad news is that skin color, political persuasion, ethnic background, gender, or sexual orientation excludes no one from this weakness. The good news is that an awareness of our biases can go far toward resolving the problem.

Some might argue that bias awareness is just another soft-skill that makes diversity little more than a self-help movement replete with psycho-babble like "self-awareness" and

good for nothing more practical than making us nicer people. Nothing could be further from the truth. Awareness of our “inflexible beliefs” may not make them disappear, but it does allow interviewers, managers, and employers to correct for those biases when interpreting the worth, talents, and needs of a given employee. Just as the color-blind man is able to make better fashion choices once he is aware of just how his eye distorts the tint of an image, each of us can use knowledge of our biases to alert us to the importance of shoving these thoughts aside long enough to see others for who they are – a habit that is essential to the practice of effective management.

Awareness of our biases contributes to culture change by forcing us to see each other accurately. No longer do we base decisions about hiring or promotions or friendships for that matter on pre-conceived ideas of who an individual is. We now are able to evaluate and motivate more precisely and, in turn, create an environment in which workers of all backgrounds can function most effectively. Ultimately what this means is that we are able to take the characteristics that made our nation, and our economy, great – individuality, assertiveness, creativity, and a strong work ethic – and add to them the variety of perspectives, ideas, and skills that only a diverse work force can provide. The result is a new culture – a culture rooted in the past and equipped to confront the global challenges of the future.

Sondra Thiederman is a speaker and author on bias-reduction, diversity, and cross-cultural issues. Her latest book is Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace that provides practical tools for defeating bias and bias-related conflicts in the workplace. Most recently, she has completed work on the training video Is It Bias? Making Diversity Work. This video-based training is available through Learning Communications (www.learncom.com).

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