

Utilizing Diversity Training to Build an Inclusive Workplace

By Laraine Kaminsky



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Foreword: This article re-affirms that diversity training is a key step in building awareness within organizations of what diversity is, and what the organizational business case is for valuing those differences. Diversity training provides a forum and venue for discussion, in a safe and controlled environment, of topics that are frequently not discussed.

“It is impossible for a man to learn what he thinks he already knows”. Epictetus

Should training be mandated or voluntary?

How long does it take?

Should groups be divided by functional level or in intact teams? Don't you have an off-the shelf product?

These are the kinds of questions I have been asked over the past 16 years that our firm has been designing and delivering diversity training. This article will address those questions and provide an overview of some of the current national and international trends regarding best practice in diversity training.

Dimensions of Diversity

As there are multiple dimensions of diversity, each organization must determine, in collaboration with our firm, which aspects require most attention in their specific context. Dimensions central to many organizations in the US and Canada, as well as internationally, include race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, culture, religion, age or ability. Any of those, and even intersections of those dimensions of diversity, may be found to have an impact on overall performance in an organization. For this and other reasons, we follow a partnership approach with our clients. Only collaboration can ensure that the training is applicable and has impact in each specific environment. The consulting company should follow an ascribed framework to partner with the organization to build on the organizational values so that there is an action plan for the promotion of an Inclusive Workplace.

Training from a Compliance Perspective

Some organizations explore and implement diversity training because legislation requires them to ensure equal opportunity. In this case, we speak of training from a compliance perspective. The focus can be on one or all of the legislation-targeted groups. In this context, extra care must be given to the marketing and

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framing of a training intervention. Communicating a consistent and engaging message can support buy-in and enhance both the actual value and impact of the training. Many organizations start out with this approach and other organizations experience along the way that a strategic diversity approach can support organizational goals far beyond meeting legislative requirements. Our recommendation is that even training from a compliance perspective should include a strong message explaining the concept of inclusion.

From Compliance to Commitment

For organizations that approach diversity training as a component of an overall strategy to build a more respectful inclusive work environment, the initiative needs to be championed from the most senior team in the organization. In cases where organizations move from compliance to commitment, a single champion is rarely sufficient to create the momentum that is necessary to transform an organizational culture from “exclusive” to “inclusive”. By inclusiveness, we mean a culture where everyone is engaged and contributes to their full potential. Increasingly, this has been linked with the concept of employee engagement.

Inclusive Leadership

Many participants attending diversity training ask, “Did my boss attend this training as well?” Now more than ever when launching diversity training, it needs to start with the leaders who demonstrate understanding of the benefits of characteristics of Inclusive Leadership. This leadership approach values and leverages the diversity of the employee base and recognizes the importance of human capital and employee engagement to any organization’s success. Leaders who walk the talk also help avoid “flavor of the day” cynicism.

Diversity training has turned out to be especially effective if cascaded down through an organization, which would suggest mandated training. It can prove effective to involve complete teams or functional levels together, depending on the primary objectives. The training certainly needs to be customized and relevant so that it resonates with the audience and is applicable to a participant’s daily experience at work. Customization is one of the prerequisites to integrating training into an organization’s overall strategy and direction. Whether training should be mandated or optional has to be looked at in every specific context: there is no generic recipe.

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Building Diversity Awareness and Creating a Culture of Respect

The fundamental form of diversity training focuses on building awareness about one's own diversity in terms of culture, values, beliefs, biases, historical context and the impact of those on an individual's behavior and how he or she views the world. Participants learn about the diversity around them and the dangers of stereotypes. Knowledge and awareness are the cornerstones on which a respectful and inclusive workplace can be built. Even basic diversity training should discuss the actual impact of diversity in a participant's environment. If training is participatory and engaging, participants can apply their knowledge in an experiential and safe way while building transferable skills. Our firm uses customized case scenarios that describe common diversity dilemmas.

Managing Diversity

A more advanced form of diversity training deals with managing diversity. Our firm includes components on building skills for communicating in a diverse environment. Also, effectively accommodating differences is a very common request. This form is especially effective if participants have similar roles in terms of staff management, such as hiring, promoting, giving feedback, etc. North America is a multi-cultural and diverse region and we have been working with clients in this environment for many years. Since 9/11, we have seen a heightened awareness of differences but often without awareness of how to find the third way, so that those differences can be leveraged.

We talk about "reflecting ourselves" as being an important criterion of success, particularly when all levels of an organization can reflect their customer base and society as a whole.

Diversity – A Competitive Weapon

Diversity training presents an opportunity to increase knowledge, respect and build a more inclusive environment where employees can contribute to their fullest potential. Diversity training which is part of a Diversity strategy, can be leveraged to support other organizational goals, such as retention, customer satisfaction or productivity.

"Diversity isn't an idea. It's a competitive weapon." Raymond W. Smith, Chairman & CEO, Bell Atlantic.