So You Think You Need Diversity Training?

BEFORE YOU TAKE THE PLUNGE,
ANSWER THESE SIX QUESTIONS

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The business community continues to get new buzzwords pertaining to diversity from unconscious bias and migraggressions and microinequities to understanding generational differences and transgender employees, the issues continue to emerge. While these may feel like fads, they often lead to training.

Trends or fads aside, the truth is that with the enormous demographic changes afoot, diversity training is often a crucial need which competes for scarce organizational resources.

Because these resources are painfully finite, before an investment in this kind of potentially worthwhile venture is made, some tough questions need to be hit head on.

STOP, GO, OR WAIT?

The answers to these questions may give the GREEN light to your training. After reading this article, you may feel that starting tomorrow is none to soon.

But the information may also signal YELLOW, and indicate some areas of caution that need attention before proceeding. Diversity training can have a big pay off but unless you can answer 'yes' to all of the following six questions, you currently have a RED light and should not proceed until necessary issues are addressed.

1. Are there clear symptoms or indicators of things gone wrong that have their origins in the diverse mix of your group? If so, what are they?

In other words, what's going on in the organization that leads you to believe diversity training is needed? Are there people from different backgrounds or cultures who barely communicate? Do you notice cliques or power struggles drawn along ethnic or departmental lines? Can you point to conflicts that seem to be rooted in the rubs we usually feel when other people don't do things the way we do?

2. Is the training both necessary and relevant?

Part of the answer to whether or not the training is *necessary* can be determined by looking at the symptoms checklist. If cliques, conflict, mistakes or distractions occur because of symptoms of cultural disharmony, then clearly some kind of training is a necessary step.

If turnover seems greater than ever and exit interviews indicate that good, talented people are leaving because they are having trouble adjusting to the demands of working with people different from themselves, then diversity training is a wise investment. Diversity training is particularly effective when handled as part of team building and the results can be far reaching in creating workgroup understanding and effectiveness, no matter how different the individuals are in culture or work style.

The issue of *relevance* is a separate matter. The answers to these questions will give you valuable information regarding relevance.

- "What are your goals and objectives?"

- "What tells you that you need this training?"

- "How do you define the problem?"

- "How would other people on the staff define the problem?"

- "What specific changes or results do you want to see as a result of this training?"

- "What outcomes *must* you see in order to know that the organization's time, energy and money has been worth the investment?"

- "What resources are you willing to commit in order to see your goals and objectives accomplished?"

- "Who else needs to be interviewed before this training takes place?"

Collecting this kind of information should enable your organization's training and development team to design on-target training or to contract with a skilled consultant who can.

3. Is there real support for the training?

Will the training effort be backed up by the allocation of time and money that makes it an important priority? Token support is demoralizing. When training is not a high enough priority for top management to attend — or for participants to be released from their regular duties to partjicipate then numbers dwindle, skepticism grows, and training in general becomes a tolerated nuisance.

ALL training must have management support, but it is even more critical for diversity training. There is a built-in fear and resistance, sometimes rational but frequently irrational, to the diversity issue. The following are typical responses:

- "What are the chances I will lose my job due to an increased emphasis on diversity?"

- "How do I work with someone who looks and sounds so different from me? I'm not comfortable with someone who looks like that."

- "Why can't life be the way it used to be when you could talk to and understand everyone? I miss those good ol' days."

Embedded in these hypothetical questions are just a few of the fears that cause people to dig in their individual and collective heels at the mere mention of diversity training. If you go forward with the training, expect a mixture of reactions ranging from curiosity — to "it's about time" — to covert hostility.

But If there is real support at the top, and the right consultant or trainer is used, the resistance should diminish over time, and real progress in the form of increased cohesion and energy toward work can be made.

4. Are there clearly defined purposes to the training?

Has the groundwork been laid so that all participants know why they are there? When planning these sessions ask yourself what trainees will be able to do after the session that they cannot do before. State objectives specifically and behaviorally so results can be measured.

Whatever your purpose for the training may be, it needs to be clearly defined, stated for all to see, and measured.

5. Are sessions structured so that trainees actively participate?

Learning is internalized more effectively when people *see, do* and *hear.* A combination of self-assessment, lecture, and discussion maintains participant interest. Most importantly, there needs to be application to-real life work situations, problems, and issues.

Learning about different cultures, backgrounds and approaches to life is not meaningful or even possible in a vacuum.

Further, the most effective diversity training emphasizes common ground. I see that you *look* different from me, but we both value our families, both have hopes and dreams for our children, both struggle to live purposeful, meaningful lives. This awareness and insight won't happen in the absence of interactive learning.

6. Is there a commitment to follow up, both by participants and management, that goes beyond lip service and tokenism?

Building action plans and follow-up steps is critical if there is to be any impact. Accountability and implementation are best insured when bosses and trainees work hand-in-hand to apply newly learned strategies and skills on the job.

One way to accomplish the use and reinforcement of these skills is to make the new behaviors part of the performance appraisal. Where group action steps are appropriate, attaching names, dates and places to all items helps, in some organizations, diversity training begins and ends with personal awareness of attitudes, prejudices and fears.

In other cases, some organizations go beyond awareness to knowledge about specific cultures and information about what culture really is. The most thorough training combines awareness and knowledge with skill development. For example, how do handling conflicts, running meetings, and being appropriately assertive differ in certain cultural environments? Integrating and using newly-learned skills happens when there is reinforcement through follow-up.

There is no quick and easy way to build cohesion among diverse individuals who enter a work place from so many different vantage points. But, if the investment is to be

made at all, if hopes are to be raised, if goals are to be set, then a number of questions must be addressed that will increase the chances of success.

Answering the above six questions can help you determine what, if any, kind of training should be undertaken. More importantly, with an appropriate long-range perspective, a realistic set of objectives, and training or consulting that is implemented and tailored to your organization, the results can more than justify the investment.

One thing is for certain. The demographic changes we see are not illusory or hypothetical. These real differences in the composition of our population mean that however trendy we may be on other issues, we can ill afford fadism on this one.

10 Symptoms that may Indicate a Need for Diversity Training

☐ 1. Complaints about insensitive comments made or jokes told in the work unit regarding age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or physical ability.

☐ 2. Inability to retain members of diverse groups.

☐ 3. Open conflict between groups or people from different groups.

☐ 4. Lack of diversity throughout *all* levels of the organization.

☐ 5. Cultural faux pas committed out of ignorance, not maliciousness.

☐ 6. Diversity-related blocks in communication that impede work flow.

☐ 7. Misinterpreting or not understanding directions which lead to mistakes, repeating tasks and low productivity.

☐ 8. EEOC suits.

☐ 9. A sense of feeling isolated and unconnected to the work group.

☐ 10. Perception that one's strength and background arc not valued for the unique contribution that can be made.

☐ 11. Other

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Let us know what's going on in your organization. Check any of the symptoms above, or add your own on the line marked "Other" and either send the information to 12658 W. Washington Blvd., Suite 105, Los Angeles, CA 90066, or fax it to (310) 823-3923.