

# **LAYING THE FOUNDATION**

## **An Employer's Guide to Developing an Effective Diversity Program**

*by Gerda Govine, Ed.D.*

As Human Resource Professionals charged with shielding your company from complaints and lawsuits, you benefit twofold from the successful implementation of a diversity training program in the workplace. An organizational diversity consultant and expert witness in employment discrimination issues explain the steps you and your organization should take to develop such an initiative.

The first thing you need to know about diversity training is that it is a *process*, not a quick-fix by which one session solves all of the organization's problems. As Human Resource professionals who want to prevent illegal practices, it could well be up to you to recommend to managers that they establish a diversity training program. It is true that diversity training in and of itself does not stop internal or external complaints or lawsuits, but it can reduce the legal dangers associated with such complaints.

An effective diversity effort sheds light on problem areas within the organization that may have been hidden, ignored, or denied in the past.

### **Nine Questions to Get the Ball Rolling...**

Even before you sit down to discuss the design of an effective diversity training program, you must obtain answers to the following questions regarding the workplace environment:

1. What is the history and outcome of internal or external complaints alleging discriminatory practices?
2. Has diversity training taken place?
3. What did the training include?
4. What were the results?
5. Is the Company in a pre-litigation, litigation, or post-litigation state as a result of employment discrimination lawsuits?
6. What kind of cases or complaints have come from staff?
7. What are the recutting themes of the complaints within the organization (e.g., age, gender, race, or religion)?
8. How have these complaints been resolved from a management perspective?
9. What are the gaps in the organizational environment that diversity training might impact?

Having answers to these questions up front is one way for you to pinpoint the realities of your workplace culture. It also sets the stage for the introduction and implementation of an effective diversity training program.

## ...And Eight More So You Don't Drop the Ball

The following eight sections delineate the questions that must be addressed in order to craft a meaningful and productive diversity training program.

**What issues within the organization are related to diversity?** Prior to meeting with diversity consultants, you should require human resource or diversity staff to develop a general overview of diversity issues (e.g. gender, race, and sexual orientation), and the impact they have on the workplace. Be sure that the chief executive officer (CEO) or top-level managers relay their expectations regarding the hiring process to the individuals responsible for bringing in new employees. The two groups have to nail down what they want to happen as a result of diversity training, and the kinds of changes or shifts they want to see in the workplace culture.

**What constitutes diversity training?** Individuals usually put their own spin on what diversity is or is not. Nevertheless, the definition used here incorporates two core considerations: dealing with diversity from a value-added perspective, and acknowledging and making the changes necessary within the work environment to level the playing field for everyone.

Diversity goes beyond gender and race, even though the majority of workplace challenges are in those two areas. The global view of diversity considers age, education, religion, job classification, physical challenges, and other issues that can cause rifts in the work environment. As you know, it is illegal to treat employees differently from one another based on these differences.

The most common type of diversity training is meant to increase awareness and sensitivity and is usually targeted to all levels of staff. This introductory approach allows employees to look at diversity from three vantage points:

- personal
- interpersonal
- organizational

It also allows them to communicate across the boundaries created by these differences, perhaps for the first time.

Another type of training is geared toward supervisors and managers, who are taught the specific skills needed to resolve diversity issues before they become unwieldy. The basic package for this type of training includes awareness and sensitivity training for the supervisors and managers. Because the buck stops at their desks, this group learns not to ignore or downplay diversity concerns that can cause long-term schisms in the workplace.

In the training sessions, the facilitator emphasizes the skills of situational analysis and problem-solving. In addition, the managers and supervisors find out what kind of action to take, when to take it, and how to bring closure to diversity issues. They learn which decisions are appropriate and which ones can create a legal quagmire for the company.

To be effective, the diversity training sessions must include ongoing dialogue between the employees and the trainer. Experienced facilitators schedule ample time for participants to communicate with and

learn from each other, and they encourage the participants to offer feedback. Question-and answer periods, role-playing, problem-solving, presentation of case studies, and experiential sharing are methods that encourage valuable trainer-employee and employee-employee interaction.

**Who will be in charge of the program and what role will he/she/they play in the process?** Based on my experience, diversity initiatives are most successful when a “champion” is identified, is visible, articulates and guides the company’s diversity policy.

Today, more so than in the past, employers looking at the bottom line are realizing that a diverse workforce can be an economic benefit. Other employers who have been hit with complaints and lawsuits believe that training can help them limit their liability. Still, others simply want to do what’s right from a moral and ethical standpoint. Regardless of the motivation, the organization “champion” must be able to frame and discuss the rationale of the training on behalf of the entire workforce. This being the case, CEO’s or executive level managers make the best “champions.” They provide the leadership, clout, and decision-making ability necessary to help prepare the workplace culture for diversity training.

**Who will handle the hiring of a diversity consultant: an individual or a panel?** It is vital to establish what the recruitment process will entail and whether a group of employees will be responsible for reviewing resumes and interviewing and recommending candidates. These employees could be personnel from the human resources, affirmative action, equal opportunity, or diversity departments, or from your legal department. However, staff from various levels and departments outside of those mentioned can be assembled to form an ad hoc committee responsible for managing the hiring process. Even so, one individual should be charged with coordinating this effort.

You might want to develop a pool of diversity consultants candidates by asking employees for recommendations. You could also look to professional groups, diversity conference participants and organizers, and colleagues at companies similar to yours who can recommend consultants with whom they have worked.

**How will the interview process for the diversity consultant work?** A critical step first step is to appoint a coordinator—someone who directs the process and helps to create a panel of employees representing the diversity (e.g., age, agenda, race, tenure, and classifications level) in the organization. A lack of diversity in any of these areas may signal this as an issue that should be explored with the diversity consultant candidates during their interviews.

**What information should the employee panel require from the diversity candidate?** The employees should thoroughly review the candidates’ applications and supporting documentation in order to frame pertinent questions and keep the interviews focused. The qualifications and education of the consultant is key. One the interview panel completes the interviews, they should recommend the top candidates, based on previously agreed upon criteria, to the individuals who will make the final decision.

The information required from the diversity candidate falls into seven categories:

1. Diversity philosophy or approach
  - Ascertain the consultant's definition of diversity.
  - Ask the candidate if she/he provides "canned" training or designs customized training and what that entails.
  - Inquire whether the consultant does "hands-on" training or uses associates instead of or in addition to himself/herself.
2. Assessment
  - Explore the methods used by the candidates to collect and analyze workplace data.
  - Ask which methods work best in certain workplace environments and situations.
3. Design
  - Ask for sample of previously designed training material, such as questionnaires, training manuals, and evaluation forms.
4. Facilitation
  - Request that the consultant describe the different types of facilitation processes, options and the circumstances under which it is best to use them.
5. Train the Trainer
  - Find out if the candidate has trained others to be diversity trainers in a train-the-trainer situation and what that experience entailed.
6. Outcomes
  - Inquire about the "before and after" impact of candidates' training on the workplace. Ask for specific examples.
  - Ask about the methods of assessing that impact.
7. References
  - Be sure to check the candidates' references and ask specific questions regarding the delivery and results of the diversity training.

**How will your company work with the diversity consultant?** As a preliminary step, before meeting with the consultant, organization representatives should discuss their goals for diversity training, and identify expectations and desirable outcomes. They should meet with the diversity consultant and get his/her input, to create a joint effort to which both sides are committed.

Some common examples of how your company and the diversity consultant can work together include: (1) a diversity committee that interacts with the consultant on a regular basis; (2) collaboration between the company's diversity "champion" and the consultant; and (3) interaction between the consultant and representatives from any department, e.g., human resources, legal, affirmative action, diversity, or employee relations.

**What concerns can interfere with the diversity training process?** Some concerns revolve around fear on the part of staff members, who might wonder why the training is being conducted and might not be sure of what to expect. Employees could be reluctant to air their issues out of fear that they will be subjected to rejection, ridicule and/or retaliation by other employees. Another source of unease may be the strong feelings and emotions that surface based on divergent points of view due to life experiences.

These stumbling blocks can be reduced through a company-wide written announcement issued by the CEO or "champion" prior to the commencement of training that explains: (1) the goals and objectives of the proposed diversity training; (2) which staff members will be receiving the training; (3) the name of the diversity firm and consultant(s) conducting the training; (4) whether the training is mandatory or optional; and (5) the training schedule.

Maintaining confidentiality during the diversity training process is a particularly thorny issue for most employees. Staff members want to be assured that whatever they share during the assessment phase or through training process will be kept in the strictest confidence.

The importance of establishing confidentiality as a ground rule was driven home for me when I was approached to conduct a gender study for a Fortune 500 company. The client used a boilerplate contract with all consultants that stated that all information collected was the client's property. This requirement created a dilemma, for during the data-gathering process, employees had been told that their statements would be kept confidential unless they revealed a clear violation of company policy or an illegal practice.

After I discussed my concerns with a company representative, the contract was amended to ensure that employee data would be kept confidential; it was agreed that group responses rather than individual responses would be reported.

## **Training Offers a Bevy of Benefits**

You can expect diversity training to accomplish a number of goals, including the following:

- Raise the level of staff awareness
- Heighten sensitivity to the reality of cultural variety
- Broaden individual and/or company-wide perspectives
- Reduce feelings of discomfort among employees
- Increase worker communication skills when dealing with diversity issues
- Provide an array of choices and options to help handle difficult situations
- Create more familiarity with an organization's written and unwritten norms
- Educate employees as to the company's policies and procedures as well as its complaint/grievance process
- Increase awareness of government agencies, such as the State Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), where

diversity-related complaints, for example: sexual harassment (includes same sex), sexual discrimination (includes same sex), race discrimination, age discrimination, and religious discrimination, can be filed.

An important long-term benefit that diversity training offers employers is the ability to build a strong team of workers who learn how to handle diversity issues early on. The goal is to stay ahead of potential problems, to have a savvy workforce that can make good informed decisions, and reduce employee friction and employer liability.

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