Supporting Diversity as a Manager

Today’s work force is more diverse than ever, and the marketplace has become increasingly global. Today’s employees are a diverse mix of ages, races, religions, backgrounds, and personalities; they are men and women with different and similar lifestyles, sexual orientations, work styles, physical abilities, levels of education, and ways of seeing the world.

Diversity extends throughout your organization, says R. Roosevelt Thomas Jr., a leading authority on workplace diversity and the author of Redefining Diversity. You may manage people who are single or married, with children or without children, who have come to your organization from very different work cultures and settings.

Consider these U.S. Department of Labor statistics: Five out of every six new workers in the U.S. today are women, African American, Hispanic, or immigrant. By 2010, the number of women in the U.S. labor force will have increased by almost 10 million, a growth rate almost one-third higher than that for men.

Your success as a manager depends on your ability to promote a work environment that is inclusive of every person you manage and that allows every employee to reach his or her full potential. Here we will focus on five key ways to do that.

I. **Examine your own attitudes toward diversity.**

To successfully manage a diverse group of people, you must first examine your own attitudes toward diversity. Here are some questions you might ask yourself:

- Do I spend time getting to know every individual I manage?
- Do I recognize and respect people’s different talents, abilities, and skills?
- Do I give positive feedback to all the employees I manage when it is deserved?
- Do I give constructive feedback to someone who is different from me?
- Do I provide everyone on my staff with opportunities for development and advancement? Am I equitable when choosing people for development assignments, special projects, training, and conference participation?
• Do group activities and social events encourage participation by all employees in my group?

• Do all my employees feel free to share ideas at meetings?

If you answered “no” to any of the above, you need to reflect on your behaviors and management style.

Why is it important to ask yourself questions like the ones listed here? Most of us don’t think of ourselves as being racist, sexist, homophobic, ageist, or biased or prejudiced toward others. However, research shows that employees from racial, ethnic, and other minority groups continue to face negative stereotypes and bias in the workplace. According to Catalyst, the leading nonprofit research organization devoted to expanding opportunities for women at work, the barriers facing African-American women in business include “more frequent questioning of their credibility and authority; and a lack of institutional support.” Other minority group members have described similar experiences. Fighting negative stereotypes is part of your job as a manager.

2. **Look at the culture and climate in your group and organization.**

How much do people in your group feel respected by their co-workers and by management? In a work group where people are not collaborating and partnering fully with those who are similar to and different from them, you might see the following behaviors:

• little interaction among people of different backgrounds or cultures

• conflict or tension between people of different races, ethnicities, ages, or abilities

• insensitive comments or interactions among people, such as jokes based on race, gender or sexual orientation, or mimicking someone’s accent

• individuals isolated from the group

• lack of suggestions or other signs of noninvolvement in team discussions from members of particular groups

• increases in gossip, whispering, or negative communication

If there is friction in your group or you are having problems with an individual employee, talk with your supervisor or an EAP consultant about ways to handle the problem.

Contact HR immediately if an employee:

• makes direct or indirect threats

• exhibits intimidating, harassing, or aggressive behavior
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• displays racist, sexist, or inappropriate behaviors or remarks
• has conflicts with co-workers or management

3. Support diversity in your actions, interactions, and words.
In a January 2001 SHRM article on retaining young, diverse workers, Catherine Dixon-Kheir recommends five ways managers can support diversity:

• Introduce employees to the organization, co-workers, and other managers with whom they will come in contact.

• Help employees learn about and be part of your organization’s professional groups and informal networks.

• Help employees advance their ideas so they feel valued and recognized throughout the organization.

• Be open and fair in your communications with employees. Share information with the people you manage consistently and across the board.

• Be an advocate for and support all employees, especially in difficult situations. Be willing to go to bat on an employee’s behalf.

Here are more recommendations from other experts:

• Acknowledge differences. You might say to employees, “We may have different values, but we respect each person’s right to his or her opinions.”

• Be an advocate for diversity, and get involved in diversity efforts in your organization.
  - Push for minority and gender representation on committees and teams.
  - Seek and interview diverse candidates for job openings.
  - Talk to your HR department about volunteering for campus recruiting at high schools, colleges, and other training institutions with high minority populations or at diversity job fairs.
  - Create celebrations around diversity. Invite involvement from your employees, and find out where their interests are and areas they would like to explore.
  - Begin a mentoring relationship with a minority employee in another department. (This is different from the coaching you do for your own employees.)
  - If your company sponsors community volunteer activities that serve a diverse population, encourage employees to participate. Maybe your department could spend a few hours each month involved in such an activity, with people participating as workload allows.
  - Play an active role in your company’s employee affinity or networking groups.
• Make an effort to be inclusive of all employees at meetings, social events, and on- and off-site get-togethers.

• Make sure all employees are aware of the programs your organization offers to help with personal and work issues, and encourage them to use these resources. The program that provided this publication can help with parenting concerns, stress management, finding child care and services for older relatives, budgeting and debt issues, work-related questions and concerns, and many other issues. The program’s Web site provides a wealth of information and resources.

• Promote and support companywide diversity efforts or awards.

4. Manage to each individual’s unique talents and strengths.
There are two basic assumptions that guide the world’s best managers, write Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton in Now, Discover Your Strengths: (1) “Each person’s talents are enduring and unique.” (2) “Each person’s greatest room for growth is in the areas of his or her greatest strength.”

Here are ways to manage to the unique talents and strengths in your group:

• Pay attention to and respect people’s values and beliefs. Work to understand differences among people within your group and organization.

• Use each individual’s experience, background, and way of looking at issues as a resource.

• Avoid generalities and stereotypes in all of your communications with employees. Diversity training will be very helpful to your growth in this area. In the meantime, if you think you might generalize or stereotype in your communications, turn to a trusted mentor or adviser, even someone outside work, to review some of your written communications for you and make suggestions.

• Keep in mind that people’s talents, skills, and personalities are different. Some people thrive in brainstorming meetings while others find on-the-spot idea-sharing intimidating. Some people need lots of detailed data and information, while others want to understand issues from a big-picture perspective or only want to talk about the human impact. Observe people’s interactions and individual work styles, and try to respect these as much as possible. Make it a priority to find out what works to motivate or reward each of your employees. Remember -- what works for one person won’t necessarily work for another.

5. Provide opportunities for ongoing learning and mentoring.
The best way to build and maintain a diverse work force is to support people in working to their potential. That means providing ongoing opportunities for learning and development. Here are some tips:
• *Train and educate.* Provide employees with the direction and tools they need to perform their work to the very best of their ability. That might mean initiating a dialog with each employee you manage around his or her learning and support needs. Then follow up with HR or your training department to ensure that people are developing the skills they need. Or follow up with management if an employee needs better equipment or more resources.

• *Create situations in which employees can meet others who share their interests and goals.* Provide opportunities for employees to learn from one another.

• *Encourage mentorship opportunities for all employees.* Introduce people who you think might work together effectively to promote an employee’s development.

• *Be sure employees are aware of all learning opportunities available through your organization.* Make sure that developmental opportunities are widely publicized. These might include tuition reimbursement programs, seminars, online trainings, and the opportunity to attend workshops and conferences.

• *Encourage and support networking programs and opportunities.* These might be training networks, professional networks, or informal networks where people share contacts and exchange ideas and information. They might be networks for women employees, for employees of color, or for younger employees in your group. “They can be an important business resource,” reports Catalyst, “both internally and externally. For example, some women’s networks have sponsored events for women clients and customers with excellent results.”

• *Seek out learning opportunities for yourself.* Attend diversity training and workshops.

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