



Diversity – It’s More Than Just A Notion

Abstract

Oh no, here they go again...not another diversity initiative...not another diversity article...not another diversity program! Sound familiar? What’s wrong with this scenario? The problem is that for far too long, diversity has been the “whipping post” for many issues in organizations that are not necessarily about diversity in and of themselves.



Diversity Defined

There are over 6 billion people on this planet we call earth. Diversity is more than just a notion. It has been defined by Merriam-Webster as meaning “differing from one another or unlike. Composed of distinct or unlike elements or qualities”. This word is also used to simply mean different.

Diversity is much bigger than the all too familiar issues of race and gender equity. It is about leadership’s capacity to influence people to WILLINGLY work toward company objectives. Diversity is moving beyond the usual and customary familiar zone in order to build trust. It is valuing differences no matter how big or small they may seem. Diversity is about taking the time and making the commitment to see the “good” in being different and sharing in the promise that similarities offer.

To do this, it will take moving beyond the fear of not knowing what to expect, to expecting greatness of others. It will take moving away from what is familiar and comfortable and what most have come to trust and that is, moving into relationships with those who are not similar in outward appearance, thinking styles, and personalities. It means breaking down the old models of what success looks like and reframe who is seen as having leadership potential.

Understanding Diversity

In order to understand diversity, it is important to understand how individuals are different. According to diversity experts Gardenswartz and Rowe's Diversity Wheel, there are four layers and over 24 dimensions that can be seen as possible biases towards another individual. Some of those 24 dimensions include: marital status, geographical location, education, income, personal appearance, age and generational differences. Before one decides that they have NO biases, think about this. How often do some fall into the trap of stereotyping individuals who are overweight? What about people whose social economic status is not what one thinks it should or could be? Do some turn noses up to those whose battles with literacy keep them in the bottom trenches of our society? How often is it forgotten that there are many generational issues at work as well?

Benefits of A Diverse Environment

Have you ever wondered what it might be like if all there was to eat in this country was apple pie and hot dogs. After all, if there were no value in diversity of eating preferences in the culinary world, there might not be Chinese take out or an Italian buffet and there may certainly be little appreciation for German potato salad. What about soul cuisine or Mexican food...what could that possibly be like?

In organizations, the same issues exist. If companies are to stay competitive in this fast changing work environment, they are going to have to make it okay for everyone to step up to the plate. This demands that a culture of acceptance be established along with an environment of opportunity and an atmosphere of trust developed. Trust in the innate goodness of an individual. It is important to believe that most people want to do the best they can in the job they have.

Employee potential is maximized through self-awareness and understanding combined with management and leaderships' commitment to provide a safe environment for employee development. Working in tandem with an employee's talents discovered through self-awareness, employees can realize improved self-management skills and increased job satisfaction.

The world is growing smaller every day and as a result we are living in a global society. Any company wanting to hire and keep the best and brightest, meet the needs of its customers both internally and externally, and ride the wave of success in product development and financial rewards is going to need the brain power, efforts and commitment of everyone to make it happen.

Tools for Applying Diversity Principles

The first step to improve understanding and begin the journey of valuing differences is to become self-aware. One of the best ways to accomplish this is through the use of an assessment tool and a counselor or coach who is experienced in using the instrument for self-development.

There are many assessment tools on the market today but none of them is better than the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI®) to help an individual become self-aware. With the guidance of a trained professional, using the MBTI® is a non-threatening means to develop an appreciation for the diversity of differences. It lays a vitally important foundation for significant reductions in conflicts in communication, leadership, learning, teaching and in general management differences.

Another useful assessment is the Hermann Brain Dominance instrument. It measures an individual's Thinking Styles, identifying a person's preferred approach to: emotional, analytical, structural and strategic thinking. The HBDI's® focus on one's dominant thinking style nicely compliments rather than competes with the MBTI®.

When individuals clearly understand themselves and why they are motivated to think and act as they do, they can then increase their capacity for self-awareness and thus self-management to a much higher degree. Self-aware individuals generally have higher EQ (emotional intelligence) scores and greater influence over those they work and live with both professionally and personally. They also tend to have a greater appreciation for understanding and valuing the differences in others.

Rewards of Diversity

The powerful impact of a diverse management and executive team cannot be underestimated. When opportunities for advancement become available, the tendency is for executives to look for mirror images of themselves to move into the higher paying, higher visibility, and higher responsibility position. For a great many rank and file employees, this top-down cloning of management removes a prime motivator for high performance. The lack of diversity in management means most employees cannot visualize themselves advancing because they don't fit the mold.

Breaking away from the concept of the mirror image takes courage. Break the mirror and the mold and move out of that comfort zone. Bring excitement, reward and opportunities to the organization by fully supporting and embracing diversity.

Increasing diversity also interjects change within the organization – breaking stagnation. Regardless of the industry, if the organization is not being creative, learning or growing, chances are leadership is NOT maximizing its employee

potential. If companies want and need better work, higher quality products, creative problem solving and the best of multiple talents, skills and gifts in their organization, try diversity.

Summary

Diversity is not a bad word. It's the baggage that comes with the word that needs to change. Diversity is an investment of mind, body and soul. Today, more than any time in the world of work, we need to understand what diversity really means. Once corporations understand the financial benefits and how embracing diversity's principles of collective inclusion helps everyone be more successful, it ceases to be "just another program".

It is always in a company's best interest to maximize its human potential so that everyone feels safe in making a contribution. Diversity is about using everyone's strengths to reach goals. It should be painfully clear by now that none of us are as strong as all of us. Maximizing human potential means understanding how to get the highest performance output from each employee. When people are encouraged to work in their areas of strength, they are happier, more productive and more likely to stay with the company.

Diversity won't be an issue when we have learned to respect and accept differences wherever and whatever they are. Diversity is not Affirmative Action. Diversity is not just about race and gender. Diversity should not be designed to just meet a corporate or government contractor's checklist. Market drivers want it. Customers support it. The global market place demands it! Call it diversity...call it maximizing human potential...call it employee retention initiatives...call it whatever fits your strategic objectives...but DO IT! Make the commitment to build great organizations with the strength of character that helps everyone by valuing differences. It is the morally correct thing to do.

Linda J. Burrs, MA

Lindaburr@aol.com

Principal Consultant

Step Up To Success!

(937) 866-7511 (Office)

(937) 866-7512 (Fax)

www.step-up-to-success.org

About the author: Linda Burrs is a seasoned management and professional development consultant who specializes in the administration, application and use of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator.