

Changes in Attitude After Diversity Training

THE CHANGING demographics of the United States are having a significant impact on communities, organizations, society, and the nation.

For organizations in particular, it will never be business as usual again. Employee morale, productivity, and success will depend on the way organizations manage the changing demographics of their current and future workers.

But shifting from a homogenous to a more diverse workforce won't be easy. The most widely taught theories of management and motivation usually assume that the workforce is homogeneous. In many countries, such theories are not applicable. In the United States, they may be counterproductive when applied to women, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans.

To help organizations retain productive workers, maintain high employee morale, and foster understanding and harmony among culturally diverse workers, diversity training has become one solution, with widely different results.

To be effective, diversity training must be designed to change the myths of diversity (such as, it's just a code name for affirmative action), to educate participants about the realities of diversity, and to offer ways to respond to the challenges of valuing and managing diversity in the workplace.

Organizations must realize that they can no longer implement a principle of elective homogeneity. In other words, they cannot consistently recruit and promote only people who are similar in race, ethnic background, religious preference, or gender, without jeopardizing productivity and employee morale.

Keys to effective diversity training

Changing the mindset of an unreceptive audience is an enormous task. In our experience, there is no such thing as a universal diversity-training program. An effective program considers the characteristics of the audience and the uniqueness of the organiza-

tion in which audience members work. Effectiveness is measured by how much participants change in several designated categories.

Before any diversity program begins, you should assess the group's current needs and attitudes. Then, develop objectives that will provide the bases for the curriculum's design.

In addition, participants should be allowed to establish their own ground rules. That encourages them to "own" the training and to take responsibility for their behavior.

You or the facilitator should encourage participants to speak for themselves, to refrain from personal attacks on others, to be open to new or different ideas, and to express themselves freely in all discussions

■ *The myths about diversity (such as, it's just a code name for affirmative action) must be dispelled* ■

and activities. Also assure them that their expressed opinions will be held confidential and not recorded or repeated. Trainers should communicate that they have no axes to grind and that their primary responsibility is to facilitate achieving the program's objectives.

A diversity-training model

Working closely with the Federal Aviation Administration Southwest Region, the University of Oklahoma developed an experiential training model (built around real incidents at the FAA) using simulations, case scenarios, videos, instrumentation, and discussions appropriate to the managers' divisional responsibilities. Program developers created seven objectives that the FAA Southwest Region and the University of Oklahoma con-

sidered essential in preparing FAA managers and supervisors to handle the increasing diversity of FAA's workforce.

The objectives were to

- ▶ explore the primary dimensions of diversity
- ▶ analyze the effect of assimilation (socialization) on the ability of others to succeed
- ▶ explore participants' personal values, stereotypes, and prejudices
- ▶ examine the effect of destructive "isms" on others
- ▶ assess employees' readiness to value diversity
- ▶ identify current barriers that could impede cultural change
- ▶ analyze ways to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace.

These objectives formed the bases for parts of the program's curriculum—including an interactive cross-cultural simulation; an exercise for increasing awareness of the ways that people are discriminated against, judged, and isolated; a presentation showing what happens when people are confronted with people from different cultures; an exercise identifying current barriers to change; an intercultural learning activity; case scenarios; a gender-discrimination exercise; and a sexual-harassment module.

Not all 13 segments were offered in each workshop.

A total of 739 FAA managers and supervisors participated in a series of 40 workshops in several states, including Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Arkansas.

Experienced trainers from the University of Oklahoma administered the three-day workshops. A male trainer and a female trainer facilitated most of the workshops. At the end of each workshop, the trainer asked respondents to evaluate the program and the trainers.

Based on the evaluation data from all 40 workshops, consistent evidence showed that the training was effective. Most participants said that the training program was informative, was personally enriching, and provided practical work applications.

Next, the University of Oklahoma conducted a study to see whether the training made a difference in participants' attitudes, awareness, and knowledge about diversity in the workplace.

The results

Participants from the final 12 of the 40 workshops completed a supplemental evaluation asking them to rate their levels of awareness, knowledge, readiness, and experience in nine measurable outcomes before and after the workshops.

The outcomes were:

- ▶ knowledge of diversity issues
- ▶ readiness to value diversity in the workplace
- ▶ knowledge of the effect of assimilation on people's ability to succeed in the workplace
- ▶ knowledge of barriers impeding change in the workplace
- ▶ awareness of their personal stereotypes and prejudices
- ▶ knowledge of the effect of stereotypes and prejudices in the workplace
- ▶ knowledge on identifying and preventing stereotypes and prejudices in the workplace
- ▶ knowledge of the effect of sexual harassment in the workplace
- ▶ knowledge on identifying and preventing sexual harassment in the workplace.

These outcomes were direct translations of the program's seven objectives. Respondents used a scale of 1 (poor) to 10 (outstanding) to rate themselves on the outcomes.

Paired T-test procedures used to compare participants' levels of awareness, knowledge, readiness, and experience before and after the workshops showed appreciable increases in their awareness, knowledge, readiness, or experience in all outcomes. The differences were statistically significant at the .001 level.

The largest increases were participants'

- ▶ knowledge of diversity issues
- ▶ knowledge of barriers to change
- ▶ knowledge of the effect of stereotypes and prejudices in the workplace
- ▶ readiness to value diversity
- ▶ knowledge on identifying and preventing stereotypes and prejudices in the workplace.

■ *For a diversity program to succeed, there must be a balance of honesty, humor, and scholarship* ■

The overall results showed that the training made a significant difference in changing participants' attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge.

Implications

Diversity training is a sensitive, difficult topic to introduce. The difficulty is compounded by the need to walk a fine line between creating a climate of honesty and still injecting humor and scholarship. For any diversity program to succeed, there must be an appropriate balance between those two needs.

Some personalization is needed, but not at the expense of making participants feel uncomfortable expressing their viewpoints for fear of guilt or rejection. Role plays, simulations, innovative videos, and relevant discussions enabled us to accomplish our objectives. And the trainers were flexible in reacting to and accommodating the unique circumstances of each group.

Before entering the training program, most participants had strong reservations and didn't know what to expect. In their evaluations, many said that the activities helped them understand why they often viewed other cultures as threatening or why they often described other cultures negatively. After the training, many participants also understood why they sometimes resorted to stereotyping people and engaging in prejudicial behavior when dealing with people of a different culture or gender. Many appreciated the opportunity to assess their own attitudes and values for the first time and to understand how their attitudes had contributed toward a propensity to discriminate against, judge, or isolate others.

Participants did not have to reveal their personal assessments unless they felt comfortable. But they had many opportunities to discuss strategies for managing diversity in the workplace. Overall, most participants appreciated learning about diversity concepts in a nonthreatening, interactive way.

We feel that training is only the first phase in addressing issues related to diversity in the workplace. In fact, FAA managers expressed that frequently. They wanted a follow-up to the training program. The next logical phase will be to address issues related to behavioral and organizational change.

Clearly, it is critical that managers and supervisors transform their attitudes into actual behavioral changes—and that the organization promote and accommodate new attitudes and behavior. We are now proposing a second-phase diversity training program focusing on the application of diversity ideas in the workplace and on developing an environment that is conducive to conflict resolution, teambuilding, and positive change.

David L. Tan is an assistant professor of higher education, department of educational leadership and policy studies, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019. Phone 405/325-5986; e-mail dtan@uoknor.edu. Lee Morris is director of education and aerospace programs, Oklahoma Center for Continuing Education, University of Oklahoma. Phone 405/325-1964; e-mail lmorris@cce.occe.uoknor.edu. Jim Romero is director of the office of continuing medical education, College of Medicine, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, 800 N.E. 15th Street, Oklahoma City, OK 73190. Phone 405/271-2350; e-mail Jim-Romero@uokhsc.edu.

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