"THE JOY OF CREATION IS IN ITS INFINITE DIVERSITY AND
IN THE WAYS OUR DIFFERENCES COMBINE TO CREATE MEANING AND BEAUTY."
— MR. SPOCK, "STAR TREK"

Backlash!

THE CHALLENGE TO DIVERSITY TRAINING

BY MICHAEL MOBLEY AND TAMARA PAYNE

Awareness of diversity in the workplace is on the rise, but so is a backlash to some of the issues it raises. In fact, negative reactions to diversity issues are widespread enough to make the headlines.

This *Newsweek* article is typical: "A Crisis of Shattered Dreams: Decades of Racial Progress Have Given Way to Growing Resentment on Both Sides of the Color Line." *U.S. News and World Report* says, "America's Youthful Bigots: Schools Are Experiencing a Startling Rise in Hateful Violence." And in a 1991 article, *Ebony* advises readers on "How To Survive the New Racism."

And journalist Susan Faludi's book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, is a best-seller.

Battles over "political correct-

YOUR ORGANIZATION MAY OFFER DIVERSITY TRAINING, BUT IS THE COMPANY PREPARED TO HANDLE OR PREVENT THE BACKLASH THAT SOMETIMES ARISES?

ness"—a movement to change the way diverse groups are described and treated—have been reported at such colleges as Duke, the University of Connecticut, and the University of Michigan. Some of these encounters have led to lawsuits over free speech.

In Dubuque, Iowa, last year, there were 12 cross burnings.

The Prodigy System national electronic bulletin board is reported to have carried anti-semitic messages.

David Duke, a former member of the Ku Klux Klan, made a serious bid to be governor of Louisiana.

And, finally, in Los Angeles, violent riots followed a not-guilty verdict in the trial of four white police officers who allegedly beat black motorist Rodney King.

The perils of backlash

Does a climate of backlash in the community create a challenge for organizations? We think so. Multiculturalism is the new reality in the workplace, yet in our own diversity training work we have found backlash subtly sabotaging efforts to produce team-oriented, flexible organizations.

Julie O'Mara, co-author with David Jamieson of *Managing Workforce 2000,* reports that diversity issues in organizations are "increasingly highly emotional."

Time reports on the term, "token-black syndrome" or TBS, coined by diversity expert Price Cobbs. "TBS has become more widespread in recent years, as a white backlash against affirmative action has swept across the nation.... In the workplace, the prevailing view is that blacks are not required—and are unable—to meet the same standards for admission and promotion as whites."

John Leo, in a 1992 editorial in *U.S. News and World Report,* blames diversity consultants for creating divided cultural environments. He warns that organizations bringing in diversity consultants "think they are buying social peace, when they are actually more likely to be purchasing additional social conflict."

The biggest challenge facing diversity trainers today is how to handle backlash.

Fear fuels the fire

A good place to start is to review some of the arguments that people make to explain backlash. We have observed the following factors and perceptions in our work:

▶ Deep-seated biases and prejudices are emerging as a reaction to fast-paced social change.

▶ Lack of jobs and increased competition for resources create what some people see as a threatening environment. (In a *USA Today* article, Len Nichols discusses "The New Racism: A Product of Economic Inequality.")

▶ Race and gender issues are used increasingly as a political football.

▶ Sensationalistic journalism can create scapegoats and highlight stereotypes.

▶ People tend to feel comfortable with people who are similar to them, and uncomfortable with those who are different

▶ Some people see political correctness as a direct threat to first-amendment rights. *(Newsweek* quotes critics who have called it "the greatest danger to free speech since McCarthyism.")

▶ The political-correctness movement has created a legal and social mine field. Well-intentioned people feel that they must walk on eggshells around those who are different, and that if they make a mistake their good intentions will not be recognized.

▶ People confuse such terms as political correctness, diversity, multiculturalism, pluralism, equal employment opportunity, and affirmative action.

▶ Some people believe that a focus on multiculturalism will dissolve the unity of the United States. This is the thrust of *The Disuniting of America 1991,* by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and the topic of a *Time* cover story called "Whose America? A Growing Emphasis on the Nation's 'Multicultural' Heritage Exalts Racial and Ethnic Pride at the Expense of Social Cohesion."

▶ Affirmative action and EEO programs have been poorly implemented. Lawrence Drake II, vice-president of KFC, writes in *Harvard Business Review,* "Unfortunately, over time, the application of affirmative action has been misused, and the term itself today has negative connotations." People who are not considered for a job or promotion because of affirmative action cry "reverse discrimination." Many people who are hired through affirmative action feel a stigma has been placed on them.

▶ Some whites and males are tired of being made to feel guilty in every discussion of diversity. They're tired of being cast as the oppressors. Glen Collins, writing in *Self* magazine, says, "Young and old, men are reacting against the Demonic White European Male syndrome, the perceived opinion that white males are responsible for every ill."

A broader definition

Looking back it is easy to see the seeds of backlash in the kind of affirmative action training that targeted white men's attitudes toward women and minorities. The intention of affirmative action training—to eradicate prejudices that kept women and minorities from succeeding once they were hired—was good. But people presumed that women and minorities would already know about biases and prejudices, so white men were the focus of the awareness training—training that was often conducted by women and minorities.

Many people still believe that the point of diversity training is to change white men. Last year the *San Francisco Examiner* ran a story titled, "Managing New Diversity: Consultants Help White, Male Corporate Leadership Respond to Changing Face of Workforce." The story describes one consultant: "Elsie Cross is a 62-year-old black woman who is in the business of changing white men. And a big business it is."

Not surprisingly, training that appeared to "beat up" on men bred resentment, fear, and eventually backlash—and not just from white men.

"By focusing attention solely on the issues and concerns of minorities and women, those training programs were in effect discounting and devaluing those in the non-EEO and protected classes," says Barbara Walker, vice-president of human resources at the University of Cincinnati. "This approach reinforced the 'us versus them' view of the work, which made everybody feel victimized and...disempowered."

The scope of diversity work may need to be broadened. Minorities and women as well as white males have to face the challenges of diversity. Being a minority or a woman doesn't ensure that a person will be effective in working with all types of differences.

In spite of the obvious problems with EEO, affirmative action, and diversity training, the training profession has learned a lot from it. We learned about the process of countering stereotypes and about the elements of a supportive work environment. Those lessons have implications beyond race and gender.

Many people argue now that the definition of diversity should be much broader than just race and gender. Authors Julie O'Mara and David Jamieson suggest that a defini-

tion of diversity should include such differences as age, educational background, and values. A more inclusive definition acknowledges that many types of differences affect human interaction at work. An engineer, for instance, probably works differently with people than a salesperson does.

Broadening the approach could have another effect. People who are tired of what they see as a "blame and guilt" approach may now find diversity training more palatable. And skills required to deal effectively with all types of diversity will result in better managers for all employees.

The downside of this approach is that some people may think that a broader definition of diversity could "water down" the training so much that the "real" issues would not be addressed. Champions of those issues might create their own backlash.

A broader definition of diversity necessitates a close examination of who is doing the diversity training and who should be doing it.

The common practice has been to use women and minorities as diversity trainers because of their stake in the issues. A more inclusive definition of diversity calls for a broader range of diversity among trainers. That may include the presence of more white males, as well as people over 60, people without college degrees, and people who have physical disabilities.

Unfortunately, the paradigm shift in diversity work may be happening more rapidly than the shift in the population of people who are conducting the training.

Any field that has been dominated by a particular sector of the population is bound to have evolved a culture. Those doing diversity work— mainly women and minorities—have a culture that might be hard for an "outsider" to break into. They are likely to be suspicious of the motives and sincerity of white males, as well as uncomfortable with a new approach or style.

But a lack of white males on the diversity team can send participants the wrong message—that diversity work is still only about women and minorities. In order to combat the fear and resentment that plagues diversity training now, training

When Training Creates Backlash

Unfortunately, diversity training programs themselves can cause backlash. This may happen when any of the following occurs:

▶ Trainers use their own psychological issues, such as trust or group affiliation, as templates for training.

▶ Trainers have political agendas or support particular interest groups.

▶ Training is not integrated into the organization's overall approach to diversity.

▶ Training is too brief, too late, or too reactive to a bad situation such as an EEO investigation or a lawsuit.

▶ Training is presented as remedial and trainees as people with problems.

▶ Training doesn't distinguish among the different meanings of valuing diversity, pluralism, EEO, affirmative action, and managing across cultures.

▶ Training doesn't make the link between stereotyping behavior and personal or organizational effectiveness.

▶ Training uses a limited definition of whose differences should be valued.

▶ Training is based on a philosophy of political correctness.

▶ Training forces people to reveal their feelings about their co-workers or to do exercises that don't respect people's dignity or differences.

▶ Training doesn't respect individual styles of participation.

▶ Training is too shallow or too deep.

▶ Training pressures only one group to change.

▶ Resource material contains outdated views.

▶ Trainers don't model the philosophy or skills associated with valuing diversity.

▶ Training covers too few issues and doesn't engage participants individually.

▶ The curriculum is not adapted to trainees' needs or is not matched to the skills and experience of the trainer.

▶ Trainers are chosen because they represent or are advocates for a minority group.

▶ Trainers are not competent at facilitation and presentation, they have poor credibility with trainees, or they are known to be insensitive to diversity issues.

▶ The discussion of certain issues, such as reverse discrimination, is not allowed.

providers should be proactive in attracting, mentoring, and supporting nontraditional groups in doing diversity work.

The issue goes beyond race or gender. An incompetent or unqualified practitioner can create a backlash too. Being "gung-ho" about the issue is not good enough. A trainer may have good intentions but still may not possess the skill or expertise to launch an effective diversity program. See the box, "When Training Creates Backlash," for some common pitfalls.

Dealing with the backlash to diversity requires qualities beyond familiarity with diversity issues. Diversity trainers have to be capable of implementing successful training in the face of resistance. They need to have a handle on their own attitudes toward diversity so their feelings don't influence their training.

A trainer who feels frustrated by a white-dominated system, for example, might react in a hostile, flippant, or patronizing way to a white trainee's complaints about reverse discrimination. Such a reaction from the trainer reestablishes diversity as an "us versus them" issue.

Preventing backlash

In many cases, the same companies that have handled EEO and affirmative action issues badly will probably struggle with the complexities and potential pitfalls of diversity. All three issues are linked; failure to successfully manage any of the three can affect success in the others.

In a typical case, we encountered a trainee recently who maligned the affirmative action and diversity programs in her company. Positions for technical specialists had not been filled, she reported, because they

The United States and South Africa: Looking at Two Countries' Views of Diversity

I recently attended a conference in South Africa called "Valuing and Managing Diversity: Implications for South African Organizations." At the conference people talked about the dramatic sociopolitical and economic changes occurring in South Africa.

One of the key challenges, said South Africans at the conference, is the increasingly diverse workforce and marketplace. They talked about how the country needs to incorporate the majority black South African population into the mainstream. Many people believe that unless South Africa recognizes, values, and manages the role of diversity in change, it will miss a major opportunity for the rapid and successful transformation that is necessary for the country to progress.

As I sat in that conference I was struck by the similarities between the United States and South Africa concerning diversity, even though they are miles apart geographically, politically, and economically. In fact, South Africa and the United States share four distinct similarities.

The first is diversity of language. Most South Africans speak multiple languages but still face many conflicts related to language. One conflict is that black South Africans don't agree with white South Africans, who expect the majority black population to speak Afrikaans, the language of the minority white population. Blacks also resent the notion of having Afrikaans as the country's primary language.

In the United States, legislation has been introduced in Congress to make English the official national language. Many U.S. citizens agree with the idea.

One of the language challenges in the United States is helping people become comfortable hearing a variety of languages spoken. With the increasing numbers of immigrants entering the United States,

Four Similarities

LANGUAGE ISSUES

RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS

IMBALANCE OF POWER

HISTORICAL RACISM

hearing languages other than English is becoming more and more commonplace—including in the workplace.

The second comparison that I've made is that the diversity of employees in companies from both countries is not representative of the demographics of the communities of which those companies are a part. People of color and women are not proportionally represented.

This similarity is especially interesting when you consider that the two countries are almost opposite in terms of racial demographics. Black South Africans are the majority population in society, but the minority in work organizations. The United States has a white majority population. But still, the proportions of minorities and women in the workplace are not comparable to what we find in society.

People of color and women in both countries face the challenge of getting past barriers that are heavily controlled by people in positions of power—barriers such as the glass ceiling and poor communication from leaders to members of these groups.

Concerning upward mobility, I heard South Africans asking the same questions I often hear people in the United States ask:
▶ Will representative numbers of people of color and women be hired to work?
▶ Will organizations tap the human potential of people of color and women?
▶ Will people of color and women be placed in multiple functions at multiple levels?
▶ Will many people of color and women continue to experience the paradox of going to work in an organization but feeling as if they work outside the organization?

The third similarity is that within both countries there is an imbalance in power sharing when you compare the amount that people of

color contribute to the countries' GNPs and the number of leadership positions they hold. From listening to the speakers in South Africa and to comments from the classes I have taught, it appears that some people in both countries feel a resistance and fear toward spreading power across racial, ethnic, and gender lines.

In both countries, white males hold most leadership positions. People in both countries have been socialized to expect to see white males in leadership positions. I've heard people from both countries say that they fear living in a society that is led by and fully incorporates its diverse population.

The fourth similarity is that people from the two countries are uneasy talking about and studying the racist aspects of their histories. At the conference, a presenter said that he gets many requests to talk about racism in South Africa's history because people in South Africa don't know and understand it.

In the United States, blacks and Hispanics are uneasy discussing racist history. But mostly, white males are threatened by it because they feel they are being blamed. In training sessions, I often hear white males ask, "Why should I be blamed for the sins of my ancestors? Why can't you just see me as I am and let us get on with life?"

People don't want to study the history—perhaps because it is too painful, because they are ignorant of it, or because they don't see any real need for looking back.

We have said for years that we want to move forward, but that problems still exist in both countries. We are still carrying some of our past behaviors with us. We need to look at history to help us avoid repeating past mistakes. Acknowledging the racism in our histories is vital to bringing forth solutions for unity.

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were targeted for women; no "appropriate" candidates had come forward. Frustrated by the overload that the unfilled positions placed on her, the woman resented affirmative action and convinced many of her peers that working on diversity issues would do no good. Some of her colleagues took her words as evidence that diversity work was not helpful or wanted—even by those it was intended to help.
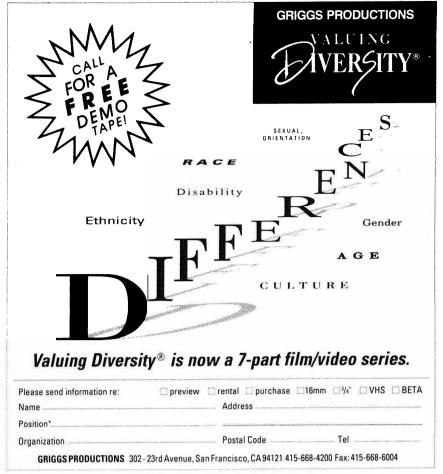
If an organization really values diversity, its affirmative action programs may not need to target particular jobs for women or minorities. To change an organization's mindset requires giving managers a broad, open definition of job requirements and the ways in which jobs can be accomplished. Managers need to recognize and understand their own biases, and must have the motivation and resources to create a truly diverse applicant pool.

Diversity does not happen by accident. The propensity in our society is for sameness and familiarity. In one organization, an all-male work team admitted openly that it had disqualified a female job candidate on the grounds that she, as a woman, "wouldn't fit in." They assumed that only another person like themselves would "fit in," to create the team cohesion that was critical to meeting the team's work goals.

Diversity work can get at the heart of such discriminatory assumption making.

We have heard from managers that the laws and programs surrounding EEO and affirmative action can create obstacles to valuing diversity. Chris Chen, of TRW's Space and Defense Sector, notes that "Today's interpretations of employment laws mitigate a firm's ability to recognize differences between employee groups. Corporations can't manage what they aren't supposed to notice."

EEO laws and policies generally mandate that companies cannot treat people unequally because of race, gender, and so on. For example, according to EEOC's Sex Discrimination Guidelines, "The principle of nondiscrimination requires that individuals be considered on the basis of individual capacities and not on the basis of any characteristics generally

attributed to the group."

Diversity training typically proposes that managers should recognize differences and not treat everyone the same. Chen suggests that "companies that institute diversity training having the best of intentions still may find themselves guilty of discriminatory practices."

Does this paradox created by the seemingly conflicting goals of EEO and diversity present a real dilemma? We don't think so. Similar seemingly contradictory messages exist in our culture without causing problems. Doctors, for example, cannot refuse to treat patients on the grounds of their differences. Yet, they are expected to study and treat each patient differently.

We believe that diversity, EEO, and AA present no more complex a paradox. Organizations can avoid that source of backlash by being clear in their understanding of diversity and precise in their expectations of employee behavior.

Position is everything

Diversity programs have traditionally come out of HRD or training departments. That positioning leads organizations to approach the programs in several ways. Some see the work as an intervention—a way of managing the legal risks associated with a diverse workforce. Others look at diversity programs as the source of a skill set that people can recall and apply as needed. Still other organizations regard diversity work as an attempt to be socially responsible.

Where diversity work is positioned can determine a program's potential to create or mitigate backlash. Positioning affects the program's ability to secure resources, command attention, and focus organizational efforts.

Support for diversity is more than just "doing the right thing." Many organizations see it as a way to do business in a world where valuing differences has replaced assimilating as a goal of many groups and individuals. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr., of the American Institute for Managing Diversity, writes in *Harvard Business Review* that "more and more employees, including white males, are coming to the workplace inclined to celebrate their differences and less willing to adapt blindly. They want to keep the traits that are unique to themselves and not unnecessarily compromise who they are."

Many organizations are redefining and repositioning the role of diversity. They are taking it into account in business strategies, long-range planning, and management approaches. This repositioning is a positive move that may lessen backlash to diversity training.

Give your training a chance

Your diversity training has a better chance of not provoking backlash if you take the following steps:

Get management aboard before a diversity training program is implemented. Getting managers to model a commitment to diversity may require special training for them.

Release a statement from top managers showing their commitment. A visible show of commitment, such as having a top manager kick off the training, also helps.

Involve employees before the design of the program. Assess people's feelings about diversity. Determine which issues the employees believe are the important ones. Acknowledge backlash and its causes.

This achieves two things. First,

you have identified the issues and attitudes of your audience. Second, your audience is more likely to feel involved and vested in the process early on. Both increase your chances of designing a successful program.

Work from an inclusive definition of diversity. A broad definition of diversity invites participation and lowers resistance. It allows people to move beyond a particular political agenda. It empowers more people to do the work and avoids contradictions later on.

Use well-qualified professionals to do the diversity training. Whether your diversity trainers are internal or external, make sure they are competent facilitators who have a good information base, reflect diversity (including white males), and make good role models. Make sure they understand the dynamics of backlash. Do not assume that any trainer or consultant is ready for diversity training.

Acknowledge resistance. Do not downplay or ignore it. If you do, it can trip you up or sabotage the outcomes of training later on. Allow people to respond and express their feelings, including hostility, skepticism, and enthusiasm. Avoid becoming defensive. A good trainer is adept enough to use the resistance as a vehicle for learning.

Let experience be the teacher. Create opportunities for experiential learning; follow up with reflection and discussion. You'll empower participants to direct their learning to where it is most needed. If they are allowed to draw their own conclusions, participants are more likely to retain what they've learned. Experiential activities help trainees become vested in the success of the program.

Affirm the value of each person's experience and viewpoint. Acknowledge good intentions even while pointing out behaviors that create problems.

Value sameness. Remember that experiences of sameness and difference both play an important part in identity development. Do not fall into the trap of devaluing sameness in an attempt to value diversity.

Put an end to the PC police. Encouraging people to pay lip service to a politically correct agenda does not qualify as effective diversity work. Such an approach only increases cynicism and backlash toward diversity work, and creates distrust between groups.

Be clear on business connections. Make sure that real-time applications to the workplace are an integral part of the training program. Be prepared to address corporate culture issues. Communicate management's expectations.

Laugh, smile, and enjoy. Diversity training is serious work. Having fun can restore balance and energize a group. Laughter can say, "We all make blunders; it's okay as long as we learn to do better the next time." Having fun can reduce tension and help give diversity a good reputation.

Follow up. Support and reward those who incorporate a diversity mindset into their jobs and who use diversity to achieve organizational goals. Have trainees contract for short- and long-

ORGANIZATIONS THAT HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL HARASSMENT OR DISCRIMINATION LAWSUITS HAVE A SPECIAL NEED TO CREATE OR REESTABLISH TRUST—A SENSE OF "WE"

term "next steps" that are measurable.

Co-facilitate. Whenever possible, co-facilitate a group with someone who is visibly different from you. This increases the chances for dealing with resistance and avoiding backlash. While one trainer engages participants, the other can objectively assess the response and provide intervention as needed. And two facilitators can model effective behavior related to differences.

Create an open atmosphere. Make sure participants know it is OK to discuss topics that people normally shy away from. Such issues might include reverse discrimination or frustration with EEO—or even a discussion with a person in a wheelchair about what it is like to be paralyzed.

Keep up with new developments in diversity training. Do not assume that a successful program designed two years ago is addressing current issues. Outdated programs can cause backlash.

Integrate special topics. If you are delivering programs on special-interest topics (for example, Hispanic heritage or gay awareness) be sure they are integrated into an overall approach to diversity. Backlash comes from groups that do not feel included when a single topic becomes the entire program.

Final challenges

The focus on differences will continue to grow as demographic changes bring even more diversity into the workforce and the marketplace. As one group emphasizes its unique background or heritage, others will want to articulate their own uniqueness. And more training professionals will face the challenge of dealing with backlash.

Diversity work also involves helping organizations tap the value and diversity in the labor pool, where the least-used groups of people are experiencing the most growth. This might include outreach programs to schools and communities, as well as other efforts that start well before an employee is hired.

Organizations that learn to use diversity as an asset will stride ahead of those that don't. The payoff will be in productivity (greater output), quality (fewer errors), flexibility (faster response to change), and innovation (more creativity).

Organizations that don't learn to respect, value, and utilize individual differences (including differences in sex, race, age, education, function, and other areas) will continue to be socked with discrimination and harassment lawsuits, low morale, high recruitment costs, high turnover, and a lack of creativity.

Organizations that have experienced sexual harassment or discrimination lawsuits have a special need to create or reestablish trust—a sense of "we." Otherwise, the atmosphere created by legal proceedings can cause backlash and disrupt productivity for years.

The stakes are also high for organizations that are already doing diversity work. Many existing diversity programs may foster backlash. At the least, that backlash can eventually kill a program. It can even lead to organizational regression in relation to the goals that the diversity work was set up to address.

Conscious awareness and management of backlash is critical. The challenges of diversity and backlash are not likely to go away by themselves. Unless organizations take action now, their futures may be threatened. ∎

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