Leading

THERE IS REASON FOR
CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM ABOUT
THE PROGRESS OF WOMEN
AND MINORITIES IN U.S.
ORGANIZATIONS,
SAYS DIVERSITY EXPERT
ANN MORRISON IN THIS
INTERVIEW WITH *TRAINING &
DEVELOPMENT* EDITOR
PATRICIA GALAGAN.

Diversity

A special report on diversity

If you need an expert on what it takes to get ahead in a U.S. organization if you aren't a white male, try Ann Morrison, president of the New Leaders Institute in Del Mar, California. Her research on barriers that hold women back led to her 1987 book, *Breaking the Glass Ceiling*—written with Randall White and Ellen Van Velsor, and the help of the Center for Creative Leadership. Morrison's latest book, *The New Leaders: Guidelines on Leadership Diversity in America*, draws on four years of research about the diversity practices of 16 successful companies. • Is she optimistic about the progress of women and minorities in U.S. organizations? Cautiously. • Does she have lessons to share about how to make diversity efforts more successful? Definitely. • In this interview with *Training & Development* editor Patricia Galagan, she tells what she learned from her latest research and describes practical steps that organizations can take to improve their results with diversity.

T&D: You've been studying diversity for quite a while. Are you hopeful about the progress of women and minorities in U.S. organizations?

Morrison: I have my optimistic days. Although there's been very little change for women and for men of color, the situation looks better than it did five years ago. For one thing, government initiatives are more collaborative and reasonable than in the past. For another, the demographics of the marketplace are starting to catch attention. Companies are realizing they need nontraditional managers to help them succeed with a diverse customer base.

The recession made investment of any kind more difficult, so we've seen

little change recently in corporate diversity efforts, except in the cases in which things are so bad the company has been willing to try things it never would have tried before.

T&D: What prompted you to write your latest book, *The New Leaders?*

Morrison: People told me that they thought *The Glass Ceiling* put too much burden on women to fix themselves. Unless the responsibility for advancement is shared, even women who make themselves into Superwomen won't be accepted in some organizations. It made sense to do a systematic analysis of some of the best, most progressive organizations to see what they were doing to break down barriers for women.

We also decided to expand the study to include people of color. Employers were reporting feeling fragmented by trying to do separate programs for each group, so we looked at common practices across organizations that affected large numbers of nontraditional managers.

These questions led to a four-year research study of practices in 16 private and public organizations. The results are in the book. It describes barriers to advancement and gives a five-step model for an action plan.

T&D: Who are the "new leaders" of the book's title?

Morrison: The new leaders are people who are competent at developing diversity. They include all people with that competency, whether they are white, black, male, or female. I call them nontraditional managers, by which I mean anyone who has been traditionally underrepresented in the management ranks.

T&D: Why do you emphasize leadership rather than management of diversity?

Morrison: I believe that until we integrate companies at the leadership level, we aren't going to have meaningful diversity efforts.

T&D: Did you notice any significant trends in the course of researching the second book?

The Top 10 Diversity Practices, Ranked by Importance

1. Top management's personal intervention.
2. Targeted recruitment of non-managers.
3. Internal advocacy groups.
4. Emphasis on EEO statistics and profiles.
5. Inclusion of diversity in performance-evaluation goals and ratings.
6. Inclusion of diversity in promotion decisions and criteria.
7. Inclusion of diversity in management succession planning.
8. Diversity training programs.
9. Networks and support groups.
10. Work-and-family policies.

Morrison: One interesting thing to me is that seven of the top 10 diversity practices have to do with accountability, rather than development or recruitment.

I think that managers who went through the 1970s had their fill of accountability to the government. That was followed by more emphasis on education, but companies are finding that just creating awareness doesn't work, and they're moving back to accountability and enforcement.

There is a discernible movement away from trying to change attitudes in the hope that people will want to do the right thing because they know what it is. Now we're seeing companies attach consequences to behavior.

In our study we found that accountability tools were being used by most organizations, and that there was balance between education and efforts to change behavior.

T&D: Have there been any changes in development programs?

Morrison: Development programs for special groups have generated a lot of backlash from people who were excluded. In many cases, white men simply refused to acknowledge the value of the programs or to consider the participants as equals.

What's happening now is a more

integrated approach to development. Companies are making sure that the participants are more diverse, and they are shaping curricula to deal with diversity as a leadership issue.

Some companies are offering more than one kind of developmental experience. We know from data collected for *The Glass Ceiling* that what women learn from an experience is not the same thing that men learn.

For example, mentoring is becoming more of a two-way process, with executives realizing that managers have to learn from the new cadre of workers how to do things differently. It can be quite a challenge for a manager to make an effort to learn from a younger, lower-level person.

T&D: What were the most common barriers to advancement uncovered by your research?

Morrison: We found 21 different barriers, but six accounted for nearly half the responses from managers. We found that the single biggest barrier to advancement is prejudice—equating a difference with a deficiency.

The next five are as follows:
▶ poor career planning
▶ a lonely, hostile, unsupportive working environment for nontraditional managers
▶ lack of organizational savvy on the part of nontraditional managers
▶ greater comfort in dealing with one's own kind
▶ difficulty in balancing family and career.

T&D: You also looked at the best diversity practices in the model companies. What did you find?

Morrison: To determine the best practices in our 16 model companies, we looked at their frequency as well as their importance to the organization's overall diversity effort. (The top 10 practices are listed in the box on this page.)

The number-one best practice is top-management intervention—not support or commitment, but direct, personal intervention. In a lot of cases this means one-on-one nudging, cajoling, demanding, encouraging,

and counseling the people who report to you.

T&D: Are there any drawbacks to direct intervention by top managers?

Morrison: One drawback is the tendency of top managers to take quick action. They jump in and "solve the problem" without understanding it well enough.

A common example of this is the case of top management learning that the turnover rate for high-potential women is much higher than for high-potential men. A common reaction to high turnover among women is to change the benefit package, because men believe that women leave to start families.

Thanks to the research of Vicky Tashjian, we know that only 7 percent of female professionals and managers leave for family reasons. Of the rest, 73 percent leave because they see limited career opportunities for women in their companies.

Another downside to personal intervention from the top is that it can take the place of building good diversity practices into the management system.

T&D: The second practice is to target recruitment of nonmanagers. Whom do you mean?

Morrison: Anyone at a level lower than management. The point is to get diversity into the lower levels of the organization.

T&D: Internal advocacy groups are third on the list. How do they help?

Morrison: These special-interest groups and networks help by lobbying management for changes. They are active at the policy level, helping HR executives, for example, interpret the impact of proposed policies. They help take the bugs out of policies before they become law. In the best of circumstances these groups have collaborative partnerships with management. In others, their contribution is more controversial.

Another benefit of such groups is that they give nontraditional managers a bigger voice. It helps them get noticed and gain credibility.

Five Action Steps for Achieving Diversity

1. Discover and rediscover diversity problems in your organization.
2. Strengthen top-management commitment.
3. Choose solutions that fit a balanced strategy.
4. Demand results and revisit goals.
5. Use building blocks to maintain momentum.

T&D: Performance evaluation is number five on the list. Does that refer to the evaluation of managers or of nontraditionals?

Morrison: A lot of so-called diversity problems are really management problems. We don't evaluate managers on the tasks of managing, such as how well they coach or how they handle career planning. These gaps become very obvious in the management of a nontraditional person.

T&D: Number six deals with the promotion process. Has it changed significantly in companies with good diversity practices?

Morrison: A trend we saw in the model organizations was to use panels of people to decide on promotions and to be sure the panels represent diversity.

T&D: What about management succession planning?

Morrison: There are several ways an executive can help ensure continued progress on diversity after he or she leaves. One way is to choose as a successor a manager who is also committed to diversity. Another is to develop a cadre of management candidates who have similar views regarding diversity.

T&D: Your complete list of best practices has 52 items. How should a company decide what's best to do?

Morrison: Most companies cannot start from scratch with their diversity practices, so they need a way to evaluate the mixture of activities that they have.

I have two recommendations. At the strategic level, try for a mixture that balances education, enforcement, and exposure.

Another kind of balance is to give individuals the best chance to develop their potential. For many years individual developmental activities have focused on challenge and nothing else. People are pushed into so much risk that they burn out or opt out.

What we've learned in our research is that there are three key pieces to individual development. The other two are recognition and support, which often need to be beefed up for nontraditional managers.

T&D: You've developed a five-step action plan for achieving diversity (see the box on this page). Would you comment on it, please?

Morrison: The five steps are based on what most managers said they would do if they could do it over again.

The first thing, in almost every case, is to figure out where you are so you can benchmark against yourself. Yes, you may have to reinvent the wheel, but the process brings out the data you need.

It's a step that gets skipped, because companies assume they know what their problems are—or because they don't really want to know what their problems are. Diversity issues are very difficult to talk about.

Step one contributes to step two—strengthening top-management commitment. Executives can be ready or willing to take action but may not know there's a problem. That's where to use the data you collected in step one.

Many companies jump in at step three, choosing solutions, but it's not my recommendation. In any case, select your practices against the evaluation criteria I mentioned earlier. Have a corporate strategy that balances education, enforcement, and exposure, and an individual strategy that balances risk, support, and rewards.

Step four toward achieving diversity is to demand results and revisit goals. I believe that diversity efforts

that don't have statistical goals are doomed. The reluctance of managers to hold themselves and others to some numbers has probably done more damage to diversity efforts than anything else.

Qualitative factors—such as a sense of climate, or anecdotal information from the workplace—are important too, but not as important as meaningful numbers.

The role of the HR professional is critical in helping create meaningful, tailored kinds of measurements that people can understand and control.

Step five is to use building blocks to keep up momentum. In many diversity success stories, the pieces build upon each other like building blocks. When the pieces are communicated, they help give a sense of the impact of diversity practices, not just their intent.

Here are some guidelines for this building process:

- Plan beyond the short-term impact of diversity practices.
- Leverage successes and progress.
- Use business opportunities to [. . .] traditional practices.
- Add diversity to diversity; go [be]yond ethnicity and sex.

What's your next book going to [be a]bout?

Morrison: How managers can spot talent in people who aren't like they are. Assessment tools aren't really very good yet for evaluating people who are different from the evaluator. There's a move to make selection and promotion decisions a team process.

I also want to look at how to make strategic decisions about diversity in organizations. Companies need help with the issue of whether to have special developmental programs for nontraditionals. That's been the practice, but backlash from those who have been left out is becoming a real problem. In general, we found that the more inclusive you can be, the better it is. Some organizations have found, for example, that totally excluding white men from taking part in development programs also excludes them from being part of the solution to diversity problems.

It's a tricky issue. When you have finite resources, you can only do a certain number of things. So do you invest heavily in a few people whom you expect to move into the leadership ranks and make a lot of other things happen, or do you water down your effort so that it can reach a whole lot of people?

There is no right or wrong answer. The key is the decision process. Who is involved in deciding how to use resources? Can enough people buy into it to make it happen? □

Ann Morrison is the author of The New Leaders: Guidelines on Leadership Diversity in America. *Reach her at the New Leaders Institute in Del Mar, California.*

The New Leaders: Guidelines on Leadership Diversity in America *is published by Jossey-Bass in San Francisco. It may be purchased through ASTD Press, 703/683-8129 (order code: MONL). The cost is $24 for ASTD members and $26 for non-members.*

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