

Seven Steps to More Effective Diversity Management

By Julie Kampf



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Once upon a time, diversity was regarded as a matter of employment equity ... an idea now as outmoded as buggy whips and Betamax. In today's global marketplace, a diverse workforce—together with an inclusive culture that values the differences and maximizes the potential of all employees—is widely regarded as a key business strategy. It can deliver better decision-making, expanded markets, more compelling products and services, happier customers, increased productivity and a better bottom line. According to *Fortune* magazine, companies that pursue diversity outperform the S&P 500.

In 1996, there were fewer than 10 executives nationwide responsible for diversity. Today, almost every Fortune 100 company has one. So it is surprising to discover that less than a third (only 30%) of U.S. organizations have an official definition of diversity, according to the 2007 State of Workplace Diversity Management Survey Report, released recently by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

Survey respondents—HR and diversity professionals—reported that the field of diversity management is not well-understood. What's more, they said, it focuses too much on compliance and overemphasizes ethnicity and gender.

SHRM, the world's largest association devoted to HR management, partnered with the American Institute for Managing Diversity to conduct the year-long study, which also found that small companies (those with 99 or fewer employees) are the least likely to have an official definition of diversity, while public/government organizations are among the most likely to define diversity.

With all the well-documented advantages of diversity, why is there so little understanding of what it really means? And what can we, as professionals, do about it?

At my firm, we take a holistic approach to diversity management. It's not just about recruiting superstar candidates (although that's our bread and butter, and we do it very, very well). Successful diversity management is ultimately about unleashing the rich and diverse potential of an entire workforce. To that end, we've developed a list of seven simple steps that can help you better manage diversity in your organization.

1. Define your terms

As the SHRM research clearly demonstrates, everyone has a different idea about what “diversity” means. Beyond race and gender, it can also include considerations of age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, mental and physical capabilities, gender identity, family status, language, and working style. Your first task should be to define diversity for your organization. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

2. Be realistic

When it comes to goal setting, it's important to involve everyone in the company who has a responsibility for diversity... from the CEO on down. Their buy-in is critical. But you also need to manage their expectations. The process of diversity management can be arduous and not every company will move forward at the same pace.

3. Build in metrics

Successful organizations typically require that their executives achieve measurable objectives. Like any operational function, diversity management should be accountable for measuring progress with regards to specific, quantifiable long- and short-term goals.

4. Assemble your resources

You can't achieve your goals as a company if you don't have the right human or fiscal resources in place. A wish is not a fact. Just saying you want to become a diverse organization doesn't guarantee that you will get there.

5. Set up a system

Talent acquisition is not about filling a quota; it's about attracting the best talent from a pool of outstanding individuals of diverse backgrounds who will ultimately contribute to the ROI. Once you've attracted the talent, it is critical to establish a process that will enable them to become an integral part of the established culture of your organization.

6. Education is essential

Everyone needs to be trained. Managers must be educated about the bottom-line benefits of diversity and the processes necessary to achieve it. New talent and current employees must be given the coaching and skills they need to move forward in the company. Without sophisticated ongoing training, you risk lose your best human resources to your competitors.

7. Demonstrate CEO support

Employees take their cues from top, so it's important that your most senior executive understands—and can, ideally, articulate—the business case for diversity.

Diversity is much, much more than a recruitment issue. It's a perpetual process, with an ambitious goal: the creation of an organizational culture where the best people want to work, where everyone is treated with dignity and respect, where people are promoted on their merits and where opportunities for success are available to all. Embedding the principles of diversity management in everything you do can be a stepping stone to achieving your company's most ambitious business goals.

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