

Six Best Practices for Diversity

by Cris Wildermuth

If you're considering a diversity development process, you may be uncertain of which tool to use, which program to adopt, where to start. These six best practices will offer you a starting "road map."

Best Practice # 1: It's All About Change

Renowned psychologist Edgar Schein said that people are more likely to change when their fear of changing is overruled by their fear of *not* changing. People change because they have found a *compelling reason* to do so. All best practices applicable for change leadership – a clear diagnosis of the current environment, a compelling vision, broad involvement of stakeholders, and optimum communications – apply to diversity initiatives as well. Review your Change Management Best Practices before embarking on a diversity initiative.

Best Practice # 2: Start from the Top

Involve the key leadership in a thorough and professional orientation session. This is not training *yet* – just an informational meeting to ensure that everyone is onboard. It is helpful to involve your legal counsel or a diversity specialist at this stage. Your leaders need to understand that once a diversity initiative starts, it needs to be taken seriously. The worst thing you could do for your organization is run a cultural audit, discover significant problems, and then ignore them for lack of support or resources.

Best Practice # 3: Think Broad

Diversity is about traditional issues such as age, gender, and race. It is also, however, about other differences that *make a difference* in the workplace such as sexual orientation, religion, national origin, parental status, education level, and organizational rank. Personality differences are a particularly important – and often forgotten – diversity area. When planning your diversity initiative it is not wise to exclude any groups because they are "not diverse" (what on earth does *that* mean?) or "members of the dominant culture." Anyone excluded from the table is a potential enemy. After all, why would a person care about an initiative that doesn't involve her?

Best Practice # 4: Think Long Term

Let's face it: Human beings are complex creatures. We all come with our own set of values, beliefs, cultural rules, and good or bad experiences. Diversity development involves changes in *attitudes* and those are particularly hard to reach. We disagree with the premise that it is possible to address behavioral change only and solve the problem through a laundry list of policies and procedures. It's not that simple. Because modern discrimination is often subtle and unconsciously driven it can't be reached through brief lectures and policy manuals. Remember that long lasting change requires long lasting interventions. Expect no miracles – get ready for the long haul.

Best Practice # 5: Think Comprehensive

It is common for organizations to tackle “diversity” problems via “diversity” workshops. These workshops often include discussions on prejudices, stereotypes, discrimination, and respectful behaviors. Human relations, however, are impacted by a myriad of competencies that may or may not be part of a more traditional diversity curriculum. Consider including conflict resolution, communications, team building, and change management in your mix.

Best Practice # 6: Think Conversivity®

We saved this one for last because of its simplicity and potential power. How many times were you encouraged to “value differences” and “celebrate diversity”? The problem, however, is that most people prefer similarities to differences. Similarity bias, or the preference for people “like us” is a very strong human tendency. People don't get together because “they are different” – they get together because they perceive common ground.

Here's the good news: The word *perception* is key to this discussion. What matters is not so much whether people are different or not. Even identical twins are different at some level. What matters is whether people *perceive* more similarities than differences. If they do, similarity bias is likely to kick in and thus reduce discriminatory behaviors.

The lesson? Think common ground. We define “Conversivity®” as the intentional search for commonalities through dialogue. It is fine to discuss differences during your training – just make sure that at the end of the day your participants have focused a big chunk of time on what they have *in common*.

Happy diverse trails... and remember the power of Conversivity®!