

## **DIVERSITY NEWS**

November 2006

**Yvonne:** Over the past several years, there have been many books, articles, and reports that have addressed methods of achieving a diverse, high-performance workforce.

**Thomas:** For example, in 1999, the National Partnership for Reinventing Government published its report on the "Best Practices in Achieving Workforce Diversity."

A year later, the Office of Personnel Management published its report on "Building and Maintaining a Diverse, High-Quality Workforce."

And in 2005, the Government Accountability Office published its report on "Diversity Management... Expert-Identified Leading Practices and Agency Examples."

**Yvonne:** In previous editions of Diversity News, we've talked about what it takes to create and maintain a positive work environment...

An environment in which the similarities and differences of individuals are valued...

An environment in which all employees can reach their potential and maximize their contributions to their organization's strategic goals and objectives.

**Thomas:** But in THIS edition of Diversity News, we'll talk about the reasons why diversity initiatives FAIL.... And we'll provide some recommendations about how to avoid those pitfalls.

**Yvonne:** Christopher Metzler is the Director of the Diversity, Inclusion, and EEO Practice program at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. There, he has developed a certification program for diversity professionals.

Each year, organizations throughout the country turn to Cornell's diversity, inclusion, and EEO training program to meet the development needs of their diversity and EEO professionals.

Metzler has identified ten reasons why diversity initiatives fail.

First among them is the failure of organizations to address deeper issues of discrimination and marginalization.

EFFECTIVE diversity initiatives uncover and address the reasons why individuals

and groups are systematically marginalized in their organizations.

Discriminatory behavior that oppresses individuals translates into oppressive practices within the organization. A successful diversity initiative EXPOSES these practices and requires the organization to change its behavior and culture.

In order to remedy the problem, many organizations undertake diversity audits that alert them to real and perceived issues of discrimination and bias.

This approach is often ineffective because many audits ask questions that ignore the deeper issues of bias and exclusion.

If an organization desires success, then it must address discrimination at the individual, interpersonal, group, and organizational levels.

**Thomas:** Another reason why diversity initiatives are unsuccessful is the failure to view diversity as organizational change.

An effective diversity initiative will change an organization AT ITS CORE. This means changes in power dynamics and organizational structure... the way decisions are made... the way the organization conducts business... and the way employees are recruited and rewarded.

According to Metzler, few organizations realize this when they BEGIN the work of diversity management. They think, instead, in terms of SMALL changes. Rarely do they expect a full-scale revolution in thinking and behavior driven by a commitment to diversity.

Some diversity initiatives generate only cosmetic change; that is, the organization becomes more diverse VISIBLY. However, behind the scenes, little change in discriminatory practices actually takes place. Some organizational cultures are so imbedded that people of color and other groups will continue to be marginalized; only people who LOOK like...and ACT like... the people in power will be given REAL opportunities.

Sometimes, organizations CHAMPION diversity but make it clear that certain things WILL NOT or CANNOT change, because of tradition or some other reason. If this is an organization's perspective, any initiative it launches will be compromised from the start.

**Yvonne:** A THIRD reason why diversity initiatives are unsuccessful is the failure to examine how much CHANGE an organization can ACCOMMODATE... and in what INCREMENTS.

Organizations often begin diversity initiatives because they recognize that something has to change. For example, an organization may realize that it is having difficulty retaining women... or people of color.

Once a leadership team decides the organization has to change, it must also acknowledge that diversity issues did not OCCUR overnight and therefore will not CHANGE overnight.

Too often, organizational diversity efforts are set up to fail because the leaders have unrealistic expectations. The result is usually backlash from people in EXCLUDED groups who expect things to change instantly, and from people in MAJORITY groups complaining about too MUCH change too SOON.

Metzler has several suggestions for meeting this challenge.

First of all, know your organization.

Secondly, cultivate allies and build bridges of cooperation.

Then, formulate long-term as well as short-term strategies.

And finally, monitor change and measure progress in order to identify the processes that are working and those that may be in need of special attention.

**Thomas:** According to Metzler, diversity initiatives are often designed to address issues only at the INDIVIDUAL level... that is, how and why PEOPLE are affected by issues of diversity.

The initiatives do not, however, address the SYSTEMIC issues—that is, how the organization's practices, policies, and procedures operate to exclude subordinated groups.

Additionally, diversity initiatives may not address the unwritten, informal systems of power, control, and mobility inside an organization.

An organization may APPEAR diverse, yet not BE diverse. It may have more women, more people of color, and more people with disabilities, yet these people still remain at lower levels of the organization's power structure.

For example, a policy to promote only from WITHIN, which has been designed to reward employee LOYALTY, may end up discriminating against women and minorities.

Similarly, a "performance management" system in which rewards are based on the size of an employee's salary instead of the value of his or her contribution may also end up discriminating against women and minorities.

In order to create a more equitable environment, organizations must effectively address formal and informal policies, practices, and procedures that are oppressive.

**Yvonne:** Whenever an organization rolls out a new initiative, it must build "buy in" by explaining to key audiences what's in it for them (and for the organization itself).

This is ESPECIALLY important with diversity initiatives, since they come with emotional and political baggage that other initiatives may not.

Failure to clearly and comprehensively articulate WHY an organization is devoting time, effort, and resources to a diversity initiative can seriously diminish its chances for success.

According to Metzler, a cohesive strategy should address... in plain language... the importance of diversity to the organization (NOT to the world at large).

The senior leadership team should have frank, open conversations about why diversity is important to the organization... and why it's important NOW.

Failure to fully educate and train senior leaders, who will ultimately be responsible for championing diversity organization-wide, will result in the initiative's marginalization from its inception... and will almost certainly lead to defeat.

If senior leaders are not clear about the benefits of diversity, then the organization should NOT move forward with an initiative.

Instead, it should focus on having the senior leadership team deal with its OWN issues around diversity, as well as examine ORGANIZATIONAL issues.

**Thomas:** Under-represented groups do not have the POWER or the INFLUENCE to effect organizational change.

Therefore, it is extremely important to recognize the critical role that White, Anglo American, heterosexual, able-bodied men play in this process.

ANY diversity initiative that does not create opportunities for THIS group to learn "what's in it for them" is doomed to fail.

As Metzler points out, if White men are not present at the decision-making table, they will likely see diversity as a chore, an obligation, a directive, or a political ploy.

They cannot reasonably be expected to commit to the process until they are genuinely engaged in it.

Given the changing demographics of the world, White men have something to gain from diversity initiatives.

For example, they can gain a deeper understanding of diversity and its relationship to the world in which they live and work.

And they can develop COMPETENCE in this area, which is essential in these times.

By supporting White, Anglo American, heterosexual, able-bodied males...as well as the members of every OTHER demographic group... a diversity initiative helps EVERYONE make better decisions... and become more effective participants... in an increasingly diverse workforce.

**Yvonne:** Organizations with successful diversity initiatives conduct diversity training. But not ALL diversity training is equally effective. And POOR training can cause more damage than no training at all.

Metzler points out that, on one end of the spectrum, diversity training has become an aspect of political correctness and a feel-good activity. At the other end, it is criticized as too confrontational and oppressive.

Metzler advises that diversity training programs must be conducted respectfully and not be used as a mask for personal or political agendas.

Effective diversity training should confront PROBLEMS, not PEOPLE. And It should expose behaviors and issues related to oppression and discrimination at the individual... interpersonal... group... and organizational levels.

Diversity training should help participants to understand themselves and others, and to build skills to address these... sometimes uncomfortable... issues.

The training should not humiliate or shame people into acting. Rather, through a well-designed methodology, it should allow people to understand the fundamental flaws of oppressive behavior... for themselves and for those who are oppressed.

**Thomas:** According to Metzler, many organizational leaders can speak articulately about diversity, but lack the knowledge... tenacity... and courage... to bring about the large-scale organizational change needed to make diversity an organizational reality.

Given the nature of diversity initiatives, LEADERSHIP on this issue may involve taking significant risks.

Authentic diversity LEADERSHIP requires the willingness to assess both the DEGREE of risk that a leader is willing to take and the RAMIFICATIONS of taking those risks.

Authentic diversity leadership requires leading by example.

The authentic diversity leader not only articulates WHY diversity is vital to organizational life, but also BELIEVES it and ACTS on it without hesitation.

They demonstrate integrity by “walking the talk.”

**Yvonne:** Another reason diversity initiatives fail involves the selection of incompetent consultants.

Given the reality of shrinking budgets, many organizations have chosen NOT to dedicate full-time staff to diversity, choosing instead to borrow from EEO or affirmative action staff... who often view diversity as simply an extension of COMPLIANCE.

According to Metzler, a significant number of people doing diversity work are human resource professionals who have been given diversity RESPONSIBILITIES without the necessary skills or training.

An organization that does not have the INTERNAL resources necessary to implement a diversity initiative may turn to an outside consultant for assistance.

Unfortunately, due to the absence of professional standards (or credentials), some “diversity consultants” lack sufficient knowledge or experience to be truly helpful.

Metzler suggests that organizations hire diversity consultants or trainers whose methodology is recognized as effective.

As described by Metzler, effective diversity training provides employees with the skills they need in order to address their OWN biases and discriminatory behavior.

The focus of diversity training, according to Metzler, should be on changing BEHAVIORS, not on correcting ATTITUDES.

## **10. ESTABLISH ACCOUNTABILITY**

[Camera 1]

**Thomas:** Many organizations have yet to devise a credible way of holding people ACCOUNTABLE for the success of diversity initiatives.

In some organizations, says Metzler, this lack of accountability has led diversity to the same second-class status that has been assigned to EEO and affirmative action.

Approaches to accountability that focus simply on the NUMBER... of women... of minorities... and of people with disabilities... that an organization RECRUITS... not only have LEGAL risks ... they may also result in the kind of RESENTMENT associated with affirmative action.

Metzler suggests that people be evaluated...

On how well they contribute to a working environment that provides equal access for everyone...

How effectively they seek out and cultivate diversity in organizational life...

How effectively they utilize procurement dollars with women- and minority-owned businesses...

How creatively and effectively they promote diverse products and services...

And how effectively they create and maintain a working environment where diversity is not only valued, it is expected.

**Yvonne:** You can find a copy Metzler's article on the Web site of Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, in the Diversity and Inclusion Practice section. Just click on the link to "Publications."

**Thomas:** That's all we have time for in THIS edition of Diversity News. We appreciate your watching, and we hope you'll tune in again next month.

Until then, for more frequent updates of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink. Just send an e-mail message to [dmeeo@va.gov](mailto:dmeeo@va.gov), with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line.

**Yvonne:** And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Also, we want to hear from YOU! If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at [dmeeo@va.gov](mailto:dmeeo@va.gov) with the words "Diversity News" in the subject line.

Until next time...

**Both:** Have a great month!