

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY



Managing diversity in the workplace requires understanding and relating with coworkers who are different than you. The success of an organization is becoming increasingly dependent on the ability of employees and managers to deal with differentiations along diverse identity lines. Diversity can be categorized in a number of ways. This includes stimulating our thinking about each other's similarities and differences. Some dimensions of diversity are unchangeable (like gender, ethnicity and physical abilities), but other dimensions may change over time (income, marital status, work experience or religious beliefs).

High Performance organizations recognize the importance of diversity to success. These organizations value contributions of diverse employees and a multicultural approach to managing diversity. This multicultural approach includes three important points:

1. Avoiding the idea that we are all the same.
2. Identifying to the unique contributions of diverse individuals.
3. Striving to provide environments that challenge and support people from all cultural backgrounds.



VALUING INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

A successful organization values the contributions of all its members. Every organization is made up of diverse groups of individuals who bring many valuable skills and experiences to the workplace.

Diversity is recognized by many of the world's leading companies. The Coca Cola Company said it best, "The success of The Coca-Cola Company depends on a workforce that is rich in its diversity of thinking, perspectives, backgrounds and culture. To maintain the magic that has made us the world's most inclusive brand, Coca-Cola has to be the world's most inclusive company." Individuals want to be apart of an organization that strives to provide opportunities for maximum self-expression and growth. High Performance organizations must recognize and embrace a diverse workforce, and also develop the skills to manage a diverse workforce.

By 2020, the number of women in the workforce is expected to increase by 6.2 percent from present day. As of 2012, people of color made up 36 percent of the labor force¹. Diversity is becoming increasingly important for companies who are looking for success in the future. In terms of business, the marketplace is now multicultural—both domestically and internationally. Demographics are changing the labor pool and there is an increase of education within the workforce. The way an organization reacts to this change, determines their long-term success.

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY ABOUT DIVERSITY

Communicating about issues of diversity can occasionally place management in an uncomfortable situation. But with the right training, management can effectively handle any diversity issues that may arise. It's important for senior management to proactively approach difficult issues. Ignoring an incident sends the message that inappropriate behavior or attitudes are acceptable. Senior management must be aware of their own attitudes, stereotypes and expectations, and also be open to discovering the limitations they place on one's perspective. Employees look towards management for guidance, and if management has a negative attitude towards diversity, employees will pick up on it and mimic the same negative behavior.

Change is a long-term struggle. Creating a multicultural atmosphere will not happen in one day. It's a constant process of change and growth, and senior management is responsible for embracing the process and creating a vision for the future.



VALUING DIFFERENCE

Differences often create discomfort and conflict; people are generally comfortable with sameness.

It's easy for an organization to become stagnant towards change, especially change involving such a sensitive topic like diversity. Senior managers face critical challenges every day, and diversity is one of those challenges. Multicultural understanding is critical for managers who supervise employees from diverse backgrounds and their understanding can be enhanced through programs designed to bridge cultural gaps². The leaders of an organization hold the responsibility for finding the most effective way to help employees handle their differences and move towards effective working relationships.

Diversity is essential for growth and synergy of any organization. Without a diverse workforce, an organization is unable to develop broad perspectives and approach problems in new and creative ways. People and their differences are the foundation for success. The central task for valuing differences is learning to view people as unique individuals, each having distinct characteristics and membership in various social groups. Seeing others as equal, though not the same, helps us see others in their fullest dimensions.

Three Keys to Overcoming Differences

1. Understanding—the more we understand others' point of view and allow for differences, the better we can communicate.
2. Acceptance—we should try to accept someone as a person of worth, even if we can't agree.
3. Forgiveness—to keep the lines of communication open, it is imperative that we learn to forgive.





USING A FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO MANAGING DIVERSITY

Demographic changes in society impact the workforce and require new management skills and focus. Leaders looking towards the future must be prepared to meet the challenges of managing an increasingly diverse workforce. High Performance organizations value the contribution of all its members, recognizing that each employee brings many valuable skills and experiences with them each day.

Flex-management skills acknowledge the “salad bowl” approach to the diverse workplace; that each individual worker retains his or her unique makeup while becoming part of the “salad” or workplace. Flex-management requires a new mindset—a different philosophy of management. At the heart of flex-management lies a deep appreciation of individual differences and an understanding that equality does not mean sameness..

CONCLUSION

Organizations must ensure that top management is committed to social reconciliation on both a personal and professional level. The best indicator of employee’s commitment to an organization is their belief that management cares about their well-being³. A diverse workforce will enhance employees’ creativity and problem-solving abilities. It will also increase an organizations’ flexibility towards tackling new challenges that may occur. To satisfy a diverse workforce, organizations must restructure their diversity initiatives to involve employees at all levels. The aim of organizations moving towards High Performance is to create an environment in which each individual feels not only accepted, but valued and appreciated as well.

1. Burns, Crosby, Kimberly Barton, and Sophia Kerby. "The State of Diversity in Today's Workforce." American Progress. 12 July 2012. <<http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/labor/report/2012/07/12/11938/the-state-of-diversity-in-todays-workforce/>>.
2. Pitts, D. W. (2006). "Modeling the impact of diversity. Review of Public Personnel Administration." 26.
3. Booyzen, Tersia. "MANAGING DIVERSITY." *Accountancy SA* (2006): 10-2. ProQuest. Web.



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