

Cultural Diversity at Work

Preparing You for Managing, Training and Conducting Business in the Golden Age

Diversity lessons CEOs have learned.

By Robin Johnson and Dr. Donna Goldstein

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Editors' note: Sometimes a moment of clarity is all it takes to correct a diversity path gone awry. Such moments can come through experience, from consultants, or during training sessions. Following are lessons three leaders learned and how they moved forward:

Add Color to Attract Color

Situation: When the CEO of an internationally known mail-order company compared sample catalogs from competitors and other companies to his own, he looked up with the first 'AHA!' As he suspected, his company's catalogs reflected a traditional image that paled in comparison to the colorful portrayals in other catalogs. Consultant Robin Johnson furthered his path toward change by commenting: "If I don't see any people of color in a catalog, I throw it away, assuming people of color, like me, do not buy their products."

Lesson: When leaders decide how to represent their company's products in the media, they must balance a keen awareness of the traditional, loyal customer image with the changing faces of newer customers. By placing "visible" diversity (such as race, gender, age and physical ability) in public communications, companies integrate their business strategy with their commitment to diversity. This makes a valuing statement to all customers.

Expect and Respect Resistance

Situation: After a military support-unit Commander convened a task force to examine unintentional occupational segregation within his organization, he decreed that all future promotion pools include diverse candidates.

But when supervisors listed their most-qualified candidates, none met his criterion. He knew candidates existed who did. Once the Commander realized that his supervisors were expressing resistance-even resentment-to "quotas," he sent the list back, reminding the managers of the organizations goals and their commitments. He talked to each manager individually and listened to

each one's concerns. The next list he received included diverse candidates.

Lesson: All change efforts engender resistance. People need time to realign their emotions, thoughts and behaviors. Trying to squelch, avoid or skate rapidly past resistance pushes it underground, where it undermines the effort. Leaders should expect resistance, but keep everyone focused on the goals by reminding them of their private commitments.

Discover Invisible Diversity

Situation: During a diversity session that focused on "style" and "cultural" differences rather than on "visible" differences, the CEO and business-unit directors of a well-known financial-assessment organization realized their employees all used one analytical style. They also realized that the visible minorities-in this company's case. Women and nonnative U S citizens- not only represented diversity in the company, but also represented different styles. Each business-unit director then decided to examine the practices and assumptions that resulted in so much stylistic homogeneity.

Lesson: Make sure your company's definition of diversity is broad enough to include the kinds of diversity that are significant in your organization.



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