



Diversity and the Bottom Line

Diversity consciousness requires an acknowledgement that there's more than one way to think and behave, more than one way to work. It acknowledges that a company's greatest resource is the rich variety of its people.

Diversity initiatives have been around for a long time. Companies who have adopted policies and practices concerning diversity have done so for a variety of reasons including legal and political. What many of these companies have learned, though, is that diversity in the workforce is increasing and that awareness (and appreciation) of diversity makes sense to the bottom line.

QUICK TIPS

Diversity in the workplace will continue to increase into the next century.

Because people are your most important resource, positive diversity policies are good business strategies.

Exposure to a variety of viewpoints and experiences increases creativity and innovation.

In a recent benchmarking effort, ten US companies representing a variety of industries were asked whether they had a diversity policy and what that policy said. All but two had a policy in place and while they were worded differently, all affirmed the value of differences in the workforce and stressed the need to use the unique talents of all individuals. The companies also recognized that their workforce would be less homogeneous going into the 21st century.

Anita Ward is a senior vice-president with Texas Commerce Bank, and an anthropologist. She observed that as an anthropologist she understands that it isn't processes that are important. Rather, people are important. She concludes with, "If you lose sight of that, you lose."

People, and the intellectual capital they bring to their work, may well be the competitive advantage that a company needs to be successful. It only makes sense, then, that the talents, expertise, knowledge, skills, and abilities of every employee be welcomed and fully utilized.

More Than One Way

To be able to contribute fully, employees need to know that there is more than one right way to do almost anything, more than one way of looking at something, and more than one way to solve a problem. This allows them to take the risk of being creative or bringing an unexplored option to the table. It creates a feeling of safety that encourages innovation and doesn't value one person or one skill set more highly than others. It may be difficult to truly practice that kind of openness — it's natural to want things to be neatly categorized into packages of good and bad, right and wrong.

So you may have to work to not make judgments, to not be too certain too quickly. You may have to consciously explore how you might be more open to possibilities and what those possibilities might contribute to your company.

Unique Characteristics and Contributions

There are differences among people that may be obvious: gender, physical challenges, race, height, weight, age. And differences that are not so obvious: education, sexual orientation, marital status, and religious affiliation.

Yet, there are differences among people that have not been thought of as diversity issues. Those are differences in the way people think, their world views, how they take in information, the way they make decisions and solve problems, the things they value, or the things that they fear. Every individual brings a variety of experiences, information, beliefs, and styles that are different to greater or lesser degrees from everyone else's. Those differences can lead to tension, but they can also inspire creativity, bring new perspectives, and enliven the workplace.

Most often, we don't stop to think how others might react to things. We see the world from our own perspective and draw our own conclusions. We don't anticipate that someone else may have a different point of view and come to different conclusions. Acknowledge your opinions and ways of doing things as your own, and invite people to offer alternative thoughts and methods.

Our experiences, beliefs, and personalities form the filters through which we see ourselves and our world. Some people look through "rose-colored glasses," while others see only clouds and no silver linings. Some people see the glass half full; others see it as half-empty. We need to realize we all have different filters and become aware that our employees and peers do not necessarily share our filters.

What to Do

There are specific actions you can take, and help your employees to take.

- **Knowledge:** Learn more about cultures, religious practices, and ways of living that are different from your own.
- **Self-awareness:** Become aware of your own feelings and biases. Know that stereotypes are often just a way to categorize information and make decisions. Determine which stereotypes or biases may negatively impact others or their ability to contribute.
- **Acceptance:** Accept that all people are unique in many ways based on their experiences and background.
- **Respect:** Work to consciously recognize individual value. Respect is powerful: It enables change and motivates people to contribute simply by building trust.

Make those your practice, and your employees will follow your example.

QUICK TIPS

Don't be too certain too soon, or you risk missing new possibilities.

Differences among people may be obvious or impossible to observe.

Learning, self-awareness, and respect are the foundation to good diversity practices.