

Synopsis of Article

&

Observation of Findings

By

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Kalev, A., Dobbin, F. Kelly, E. (April, 2006). *Best practices of best guesses? Diversity management and remediation of inequality*. American Sociological Review. Vol. 71, n. 4. pp. 589-617.

INTRODUCTION

The authors have compiled what they believe to be the first “systematic analysis” of the efficacy of diversity training. They investigated the effects of seven common diversity programs which include:

1. Affirmative Action Plans
2. Diversity Committees
3. Diversity Staff
4. Diversity Training
5. Diversity Evaluations
6. Networking Programs
7. Mentoring Programs

Their goal was to provide a meta analysis of a wide range of existing data to generate three new theoretical categories of programming. They also wanted to demonstrate that organizations that “allocate [specific] responsibility for change may be more effective than programs targeting either managerial bias or the social isolation of disadvantaged groups” (p. 590). Noting that there has been a wide range of studies conducted on diversity over the last forty years, their work provided insight into patterns of effectiveness that indicate remediation of iniquities is best accomplished by focusing outcomes through the guidance by specifically tasked individuals.

Historically the focus of diversity training design has been filtered through an interpretive lens of fixing “a lack of specific human and social capital in individual workers” (p. 591). Bias thus becomes a human deficiency best remediated by changing individual belief systems. The authors contend that this may be the least effective means of fostering change given the preponderance of evidence they analyzed.

THREE APPROACHES TO INCREASING MANAGERIAL DIVERSITY

The stated goal of most diversity training programs is to diminish inequality. The authors contend that present approaches to training are supported by weak empirical evidence. In order to provide a theoretical underpinning three “mechanisms” are suggested. They include:

1. Creating specialized positions tasked to achieve organizational diversity goals.
2. Utilizing existing theories describing causes of stereotyping and bias to design programming that “involves training and feedback as the way to eliminate managerial bias and its offspring, inequality” (p. 591).
3. Applying theories of social networks in order to design programs that lessen the isolation of minority groups and women thus fostering improved career development possibilities.

Specialized Positions

A problem driving diversity training design is the need to diminish the phenomenon of “decoupling” (p. 592). This occurs when individuals are faced with overwhelming demands and insufficient perceived need to change. In essence managers realize that legal mandates and organizational demands require that the “old ways of doing things”, although laden with past value and meaning, are no longer valid. The default behavior is to resist the change and if left with no guidance or direction continue as they have in the past. Citing a wide range of evidence from past federal studies regarding compliance of affirmative action plans the authors note that creating oversight managers and organizing diversity task force committees are effective at forcing changes in observed management behavior because each is specifically tasked to enforce organizational goals.

Education – Diversity Training

The authors’ review a range of programming dating back to the 1970’s that includes:

- ✓ Sensitivity Training
- ✓ Review of Antidiscrimination Law [legal avoidance]
- ✓ Elimination of Bias (through cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication)

Their review of findings suggests that much of this work does not necessarily decrease bias; indeed it may increase it because of emergent feelings of injustice on the majority’s part and the tendency of one to needlessly amplify stereotyping as a personal defense mechanism. Their findings also suggest that trainers tend to expand “diversity” to cover non-protected categories (currently covered by civil rights law) that include single parents, smokers, etc. thus inadvertently drawing attention away from core organizational concerns and diluting the impact of information used to change managerial behavior.

Finally, by fostering feelings of guilt over past inequities trainers create in the participant's mind an unvoiced feeling of being the proverbial "oppressor" which, in turn, further amplifies the desire to defend oneself against the aspirations of the "other" to turn them out and unfairly take their job.

Networking and Mentoring

The authors cite a wide range of data to support the observation that social isolation of individuals within organizations diminishes career advancement. Networking and mentoring programs are designed to provide a variety of opportunities for minority individuals to meet and share their expertise with people in positions of power. The authors note emerging evidence that concludes that coupling these programs directly to specific individuals who are responsible for diversity outcome implementation demonstrably enhances effectiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

The authors note that diversity training is popular among organizational leaders, lawyers and advocacy groups. In many ways diversity training becomes the bedrock of legal defense when organizations are confronted by discriminatory practices in courts of law. But all these reasons are incidental to the core question: "[Do diversity programs] do anything to increase diversity" (p. 610)?

Generally the authors conclude that "some [diversity programs] at least help women and African Americans to climb into the ranks of management. Other popular programs do not even do that" (p. 610). They conclude that "the best hope for remedying [bias and prejudice] may lie in practices that assign organization responsibility for change [to specific individuals with the power to enforce that change]" (p. 611). Finally they found that practices that target managerial bias [changing mental attitudes] and general diversity training has "show[n] virtually no effect in the aggregate" (p. 611). Managerial practices that attempt to change people's attitudes, generally well rooted in current management theory that emphasize individual empowerment, are less effective than organizational leadership centralizing authority over diversity efforts upon mandated committees and individuals to enforce implementation.

Observations

I have long felt that diversity training was far too dependent on sets of variables that in their complexity tended to negate training impact. Trying to get inside someone's mind to eliminate bias at a sufficiently deep level over the traditional one day or one week diversity training format is extremely difficult, if not impossible.

The evidence cited in this article leads me to believe that a dedicated management, focused on providing opportunities for advancement to marginalized populations will best succeed through a combination of clearly delineated behavior based outcomes coupled with individuals given clear authority for enforcement. The role of an educator is to make clear to all stakeholders that federal mandates, social justice, and the role of affirmative action makes it in the best interest of all concerned to foster a workplace that

honors all people. Evaluating diversity programming thus becomes a test of the rigor used to implement behavioral outcome formation, analysis of methods used to foster and enforce those outcomes, and the level of dedication exhibited by staff to implement desired organizational change.