Diversity In The Workplace

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Objectives:

1. Participants will be able to define a working definition of the term "diversity".
2. Participants will be able to identify at least 3 benefits of the practice of diversity in the workplace.
3. Participants will be able to identify at least 3 challenges to diversity in the workplace.
4. Participants will be able to discuss how implementation of diversity in workplace can be made real.

Diversity in the Workplace: Benefits, Challenges, and the Required Managerial Tools[1]

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Introduction

The world's increasing globalization requires more interaction among people from diverse cultures, beliefs, and backgrounds than ever before. People no longer live and work in an insular marketplace; they are now part of a worldwide economy with competition coming from nearly every continent. For this reason, profit and non-profit organizations need diversity to become more creative and open to change. Maximizing and capitalizing on workplace diversity has become an important issue for management today.

Since diversity remains a significant organizational challenge, staff must learn the skills needed in a multicultural work environment. Supervisors and managers must be prepared to teach themselves and others within their organizations to value multicultural differences in both associates and customers so that everyone is treated with dignity.

This paper is designed for staff to effectively manage diverse workforce populations. It provides a general definition for "diversity", discusses the benefits of diversity in the workplace, the challenges of managing a diverse workplace, and presents effective strategies for managing diverse workforces.

Diversity Defined

Diversity is generally defined as acknowledging, understanding, accepting, valuing, and celebrating differences among people with respect to age, class, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, race, sexual orientation, spiritual practice, and public assistance status (Esty, et al., 1995).

Diversity issues are now considered important and are projected to become even more important in the future due to increasing differences in the U.S. population. Companies need to focus on diversity and look for ways to become totally inclusive organizations because diversity has the potential of yielding greater productivity and competitive advantages (SHRM, 1995). Stephen G. Butler, co-chair of the Business-Higher Education Forum, believes that diversity is an invaluable competitive asset that America cannot afford to ignore (Robinson, 2002). Managing and valuing diversity is a key component of effective people management, which can improve workplace productivity (Black Enterprise, 2001).

Demographic changes (women in the workplace, organizational restructurings, and equal opportunity legislation) will require organizations to review their management practices and develop new and creative approaches to managing people. Changes will increase work performance and customer service.

Benefits of Diversity in the Workplace

Diversity is beneficial to both associates and employers. Although associates are interdependent in the workplace, respecting individual differences can increase productivity. Diversity in the workplace can reduce lawsuits and increase marketing opportunities, recruitment, creativity, and business image (Esty, et al., 1995). In an era when flexibility and creativity are keys to competitiveness, diversity is critical for an organization's success. Also, the consequences (loss of time and money) should not be overlooked.

Challenges of Diversity in the Workplace

There are challenges to managing a diverse work population. Managing diversity is more than simply acknowledging differences in people. It involves recognizing the value of differences, combating discrimination, and promoting inclusiveness. Managers may also be challenged with losses in personnel and work productivity due to prejudice and discrimination and complaints and legal actions against the organization (Devoe, 1999).

Negative attitudes and behaviors can be barriers to organizational diversity because they can harm working relationships and damage morale and work productivity (Esty, et al., 1995). Negative attitudes and behaviors in the workplace include prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination, which should never be used by management for hiring, retention, and termination practices (could lead to costly litigation).

Required Tools for Managing Diversity

Effective staff are aware that certain skills are necessary for creating a successful, diverse workforce. First, staff must understand discrimination and its consequences. Second, staff must recognize their own cultural biases and prejudices (Koonce, 2001). Diversity is not about differences among groups, but rather about differences among individuals. Each individual is unique and does not represent or speak for a particular group. Finally, staff must be willing to change the organization if necessary (Koonce, 2001). Organizations need to learn how to manage diversity in the workplace to be successful in the future (Flagg, 2002).

Unfortunately, there is no single recipe for success. It mainly depends on the manager's ability to understand what is best for the organization based on teamwork and the dynamics of the workplace. According to Roosevelt (2001), managing diversity is a comprehensive process for creating a work environment that includes everyone. When creating a successful diverse workforce, an effective manager should focus on personal awareness. Staff need to be aware of their personal biases. Therefore, organizations need to develop, implement, and maintain ongoing training because a one-day session of training will not change people's behaviors (Koonce, 2001). Managers must also understand that fairness is not necessarily equality. There are always exceptions to the rule.

Managing diversity is about more than equal employment opportunity and affirmative action (Losyk, 1996). Managers should expect change to be slow, while at the same time encouraging change (Koonce, 2001).

Another vital requirement when dealing with diversity is promoting a "safe" place for associates to communicate (Koonce, 2001). Social gatherings and business meetings, where every member must listen and have the chance to speak, are good ways to create dialogues. Managers should implement policies such as mentoring programs to provide associates access to information and opportunities. Also, associates should never be denied necessary, constructive, critical feedback for learning about mistakes and successes (Flagg, 2002).

Conclusion

A diverse workforce is a reflection of a changing world and marketplace. Diverse work teams bring high value to organizations. Respecting individual differences will benefit the workplace by creating a competitive edge and increasing work

productivity. Diversity management benefits associates by creating a fair and safe environment where everyone has access to opportunities and challenges. Management tools in a diverse workforce should be used to educate everyone about diversity and its issues, including laws and regulations. Most workplaces are made up of diverse cultures, so organizations need to learn how to adapt to be successful.

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Footnotes

1. This is EDIS document HR 022, a publication of the Department of Food and Resource Economics, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL. Published July 2002. Available on the World Wide Web at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu.

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Test Questions:

1. Part of defining diversity is

☐ **a.** acknowledging, understanding, accepting, valuing, and celebrating differences among people.

☐ **b.** being able to apply the correct labels to different groups of people.

☐ **c.** identifying groups of people who should get special treatment or privileges.

☐ **d.** all of the above.

2. Companies need to focus on diversity and look for ways to become totally inclusive organizations

☐ **a.** because this is the law.

☐ **b.** because some groups and special interest concerns will boycott those that do not.

☐ **c.** because diversity has the potential of yielding greater productivity and competitive advantages

☐ **d.** because it is easier than being exclusive.

3. Negative attitudes and behaviors toward diversity can be barriers to organizational diversity

☐ **a.** because this is illegal.

☐ **b.** because most people expect this to happen.

☐ **c.** because this is likely to happen in a diverse population.

☐ **d.** because they can harm working relationships, damage morale and work productivity.

4. ☐ **True** ☐ **False** *Fairness is not necessarily equality.*

5. ☐ **True** ☐ **False** *Diversity is not about differences among groups, but rather about differences among individuals.*

6. ☐ **True** ☐ **False** *Organizations need to develop and implement training because a one-day session of training will change people's behaviors.*

7. ☐ **True** ☐ **False** *Staff must understand discrimination but not necessarily its consequences.*

Answers: 1.a, 2.c, 3.d, 4.T, 5.T, 6.F, 7.F