# Unintended Negative Effects of Diversity Management

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**Diversity management has grown out of the need for organizations, agencies, and departments to address a changing workforce and other pervasive social pressures. An army of experts has emerged to meet this growing need, but frequently with questionable results. This paper highlights why diversity training is important and will become even more so, issues related to quality control of providers and services, what may go wrong within the context of providing diversity training programs, and the results in these situations for individuals and organizations.**

The term "diversity management" has become a buzzword for all organizations of all types and sizes. While organizations engage in diversity management out of a desire to assure that no person or group is discriminated against based on age, race, gender, disability, ethnicity, or religion, diversity management is not just an equal employment opportunity (EEO) issue, nor is it simply another name for affirmative action. Diversity management includes administering social environments and systems, along with organizational climate and procedures. It also entails recognizing, being open to, and utilizing human differences. The goal is to create a positive work environment for all employees. However, attempts at managing workforce diversity have potential to produce negative results.[1, 2, 3] How should organizations decide what benefits could be gained by managing the diversity of their workforces, and what emphases should be placed on these efforts?

## Why diversity management is important

Organizations undertake diversity initiatives for a multitude of reasons. The primary one is the changing face of the population in the United States. Though affirmative action activities have been practiced in various forms since the Civil Rights Act of 1964,[4] rapidly changing demographics place more importance than ever on the need to manage diversity in the workplace.[5] It has been estimated that at the turn of the millennium only 15 percent of new entrants to the workforce were white males. Though the final figures are not in, the trend toward increased workplace diversity is clear. White males are rapidly

becoming a minority in the workforce![6]    How diversity is managed will dictate, in part, responses to issues ranging from workplace morale to worker productivity and from acceptable management practices to legal risk factors.

Regardless of the reasons for diversity management initiation, it is understood that decision makers expects an array of positive outcomes from these activities.  Expectations include:

- Enhanced personal effectiveness and interpersonal communications among employees,
- Responsiveness to social and demographic changes,
- Reduction of litigation and quicker resolution of disputes,
- A climate of fairness and equity,
- Greater productivity on complex tasks,
- Increased sales, revenue, and profits.[7]

The reaction of some businesses to the study was to begin preparing for an impending "demographic tidal wave;" hence, the "diversity management" industry emerged to help cope with the anticipated flow of minority workers.[8] The result?  The number of training experts specializing in diversity has more than quadrupled since 1990, and 75% of companies either have, or plan to begin, diversity training,[9] up from just 40% two years previously.[10]   High demand, coupled with a lack of regulation, has led to legions of "quacks" consisting of thousands of self-proclaimed diversity trainers who peddle videos, simulation games, and CD-ROMs. Yet, there remains no specific qualifications or standards for trainers or any of their materials.[11, 12]

An explanation for the influx of self-appointed diversity experts is the price they can charge for their services.  One somewhat dated estimate puts the amount being paid by companies for diversity consultant services at $10 billion a year.[13]  And, this was prior to the 1993-1995 35% increase in compa- nies that reported using or planning to use such services.  According to MacDonald, in 1993 the average diversity trainer charged $2,000 per day, with the most well-known consultants commanding four to five times that.  In addi- tion, most consultants

begin with a "culture audit," which can cost an additional $30,000 to $100,000.[14]  This combination of employee interviews and surveys is used by the auditor to determine which of the firm's "cultural roots" are blocking the progress of its "non-traditional" employees. Many consultants also require the establishment of a long-term relationship with the company. For example, one diversity training firm, Elsie Cross Associates, requires a five-year commit- ment—at a total reported cost of over $2.5 million per organization.[15]  Despite the explosion of diversity training, Delikat reported that it is not clear that it benefits most employers.[16]  With such an array of unaccredited and unregu- lated consultants it is easy to see how diversity management experiences can turn negative, at the least, or nightmarish, at the worst.

# What goes wrong?

All too often, many of the things that can go wrong in the process of managing diversity do. One critic of diversity training offers the following examples of mistakes made by diversity trainers:

- Trainers' own psychological values are used as training templates;
- Trainers have political agendas or support and promote particular special interest groups;
- Training is too brief, too late, or only used in response to an existing crisis situation (such as a charge or lawsuit);
- Training is only provided as remediation and trainees are considered people with problems, or worse they are considered to be the problem;
- Training does not distinguish among diversity, EEO, affirmative action, and cross-cultural management;
- The working definition of diversity is too narrow (e.g., engineering/marketing differences, as well as male/female, should be included);
- "Political correctness" is frequently the prevailing atmosphere;
- People are forced to reveal private feelings or are subjected to uncomfortable, invasive physical and psychological exercises;
- Individual styles of participants are not respected;
- Training is "canned," often presented too shallowly or too deeply, ignoring the needs of the group and/or its members;
- Only one group is expected to change;
- Resource material contains outdated views and/or information;
- Trainers are often chosen because they represent or are advocates for a specific minority group;
- Important issues, such as reverse discrimination, may be ignored.[17] (It should be noted that even though the term reverse discrimination appears repeatedly in the literature, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or EEOC does not distinguish reverse discrimination from other forms of discrimination.)

A study of firms that completed diversity training produced limited evidence of effectiveness, with only 33% expressing that their efforts were either "quite (30%) or extremely (3%) successful." A full 50% reported neutral or mixed outcomes, while a significant portion described their results as either "largely (13%) or extremely (5%) unsuccessful."[18] A number of negative influences contribute to mixed or unsuccessful efforts, including the devaluation of employees who are perceived as "culturally different," [19, 20] reverse discrimination against members of the "majority" group, [21, 22] demoralizing and reinforcement of stereotypes the training was intended to eliminate,[23] and increased legal liabilities for the company.[24]

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# Devaluation of employees

An error that contributes to the devaluation of employees is equating diversity management with affirmative action.[25] Mcdonald contends that affirmative action itself embodies racist assumptions.[26] Diversity consultant Donna Gillottee adds that affirmative action merely puts minorities "at a disadvantage and sets them up to fail."[27] Further complicating the situation of confusing affirmative action with diversity management is the erroneous idea that affirmative action calls for establishing specific quotas.[28] The Civil Rights Act of 1964, upon which affirmative action quotas are sometimes stated to be based, expressly rejects quotas, even those established to equalize the workforce to more accurately reflect a specific population such as that of the local community, state, etc.[29]

The consequence of individuals being hired or promoted based on quotas or as a result of other affirmative action policies, is the perception of these individuals as "token appointments" who could not be hired or promoted on performance or ability alone. One of the most harmful consequences is the resulting tacit expectations and prejudices leading to the "Pygmalion Effect," (the idea that we live up to or down to the expectation others have for us) which can contribute to these individuals actually performing below others' expectations and their abilities.[30] Studies conducted at New York University show that women who believe that they have been hired or promoted based on gender rather than ability tend to devalue their own performance, choose less demanding tasks, and devalue other women in the organization.[31]

Less obvious, but just as affected are those minority individuals and women who would have succeeded without affirmative action, but whose achievements are clouded by suspicions and resentments. A poll conducted in 1995 by *USA Today*/CNN/Gallup found 19% of black women and 28% of black men believe that their colleagues "privately questioned... [their] abilities or qualifications because of affirmative action."[32]

Organizations leery of the practice of preferential hiring and promotion (the type of affirmative action practiced today) in favor of other more equitable methods of increasing minority recruitment, retention, and promotion (the legislative intent of affirmative action) may be comforted by the following data. A recent poll showed that 84 percent of the public actually opposes "favoring a minority who is less qualified than a white applicant, when filling a job in a organization that has few minority workers."[33] Additionally, 73 percent of those surveyed were found to be in favor of companies making "special efforts to find qualified minorities and women and then encouraging them to apply for jobs with that company."[34]

# Even more discrimination

A second motivation for abandoning affirmative action as a viable diversity management tool is that it, along with tactics used by less than reputable diversity trainers, has led to the paradox of reverse discrimination. This prac-

tice of using discrimination against some groups to combat discrimination against other groups is typically based on the false premise that any statistical "imbalance" in the workforce must be the result of discrimination against the underrepresented group.[35] Where non-whites and females once feared being passed over due to discrimination, *Business Week* reports many white males feel they will lose out on hiring and promotions to less qualified workers because of the rush to diversify the workplace.[36]

Debates about affirmative action policies are increasingly focusing on whose civil rights are more important, with both sides contending that their rights have been infringed upon.[37] Both parties are correct. Non-whites and females have suffered "historical injustices" resulting from discrimination. In affirmative action's attempts to right these past wrongs, individuals currently "disfavored" under the law can now be discriminated against because of their skin color (white) or their sex (male).[38]

In reality, many of those who are assumed to be members of a previously privileged group become victims of reverse discrimination, even when they have actually never benefited from employers' possible prior discrimination. They are being discriminated against solely based on the assumption that being white-and-male equals privilege and social power, an assumption to which many impoverished white males could testify is absolutely untrue. Neither is it true that all minority individuals have suffered oppression. Yet, examples abound of instances where employment policies have been based on these assumptions,[39] to the exclusion of white males' right to not suffer at the hands of discrimination.

According to Bond and Pyle, causing individuals to feel that they have been unfairly accused or blamed for inequalities serves only to increase divisiveness and increase animosity.[40] Any company looking for diversity management methods which will promote interpersonal communication among employees, increase responsiveness to social and demographic changes, and reduce litigation would do well to explore other methods of creating equal employment opportunities for non-whites and females.

Unfortunately, other sources to which managers turn for their diversity efforts are sometimes just as likely to foster reverse discrimination. The main culprit is diversity training that focuses solely on white racism or demonizes white males in an effort to pull them down from perceived pedestals and put them in their proper place. Such tactics only serve to create an atmosphere of alienation and a bias against white males exemplified via comments such as "white people are on the way out" and "all males are potential rapists."[41] Diversity efforts tied to race and gender present a threat to many white males, leading them to believe that they are the problem. It is at this point, Capowski asserts, diversity efforts become counterproductive.[42]

Some diversity trainers are not getting this point. Overmyer-Day reports that hostile confrontational tactics are one of the most frequent complaints among dissatisfied training participants, and she adds that such approaches often have been in the form of white male bashing.[43] The reasoning

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behind such tactics is based on a faulty assumption, i.e., that all white workers are naturally resistant to including non-whites in their ranks. In fact, public-opinion polls report just the opposite, revealing that support among whites for equal opportunity for blacks is extraordinarily high, exceeding 90 percent and has been so since as early as 1975.[44]

Many experts warn against creating an environment where nontraditional employees are regarded as "winners" and white males as "losers," adding that the definition of diversity should take into consideration the varied needs and concerns of all employees, including white males.[45] According to Capowski, a senior administrator echoed this sentiment when he said, "diversity must be addressed as a matter of inclusiveness."[46] Capowski continues this idea, asserting that the most common and damaging error made by companies is to think of diversity in terms of "everybody except white heterosexual males."

R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr., president of the American Institute for Managing Diversity, supports an even broader definition for diversity:

> [Diversity] extends to age, personal and corporate background, education function and personality. It includes lifestyle, sexual preference, geographic origin, tenure with the organization, exempt or nonexempt status, and management or non-management. It also shows up clearly with companies involved in acquisitions and mergers. White males are as diverse as their colleagues.[47]

Rather than approaching diversity training from the perspective that many whites are not racist and would welcome a diverse work force, diversity trainers often encourage an "us vs. them" atmosphere. Minority individuals are taught that their value can only be firmly established through the process of discriminating against white males. Trainers function as if distribution of diversity related benefits is a zero-sum game, but instead, proves the adage that "two wrongs don't make a right."

Failure to consider the implications of establishing a narrow definition of diversity can lead to a hostile work environment for white male employees. According to Lynch, the field is "rife with stories of blowups" occurring from anti-white exercises, citing the example of one simulation exercise where several senior executives stormed out after being told to sit on the floor as members of an "oppressed group."[48] At another session at the University of Cincinnati, a trainer singled out a white male graduate student, charging his family with racism and stating that the recent death of the student's father had "removed one more racist influence from his life."[49] Consultant Harris Sussman adds that 'white male' has become the newest swear word in America."[50] It is not only white males, however, who suffer at the hands of confrontational diversity exercises and other dubious tactics employed by diversity trainers.

# Demoralizing and reinforced stereotypes

According to Bond and Pyle, being different is often equated with being "wrong, pathological, unknown, and scary."[51]   Disregarding this evaluation, diversity trainers often choose to adopt the "difference perspective" and emphasize differences in hopes of bringing understanding and acceptance. While this theory initially appears sound, more often than not, what it elicits is anger and divisiveness.  Demoralization results from "cult-like methods;" "mortification and criticism;" and "coercive, abusive, and controlling techniques"—all of which have been reported via diversity training evaluations. Consider the following "diversity awareness" anecdotes:

- In an effort to make white employees of R.R. Donnelley & Sons Co. confront their alleged racism, workers were forced to sit through multiple showings of a movie portraying lynchings in the Old South. Additionally, workers were made to complete a questionnaire that asked for responses to such statements as "It is a fairly well established fact that blacks have a less pleasant body odor than white people" and "One of the main characteristics of Puerto Ricans in the United States is their sexual looseness and immorality."[52]

- During a "sensitivity session" at the University of Cincinnati, a female academic was singled out and forced to stand in front of her colleagues as an example of "the privileged white elite." Later in the same session the consultant again asked her to stand proclaiming, "We all know who the most beautiful woman in the room is. It's the woman with the three private [school] degrees and the blond hair and the blue eyes." His ridiculing tirade did not stop there. "Let's have her stand up so that everybody can look at her. Look at the pearls she's wearing, her clothes, her shoes." The woman remained in her seat, sobbing.[53]

- Almost 5,000 government and educational organizations have purchased a very popular video series entitled "Valuing Diversity" (at a price of $3,000 to $4,500). Its awareness message is presented through the simulation of biased incidents in the workplace where females or minorities are either disregarded or misunderstood by their white, male co-workers.[54]

Bond & Pyle have found that the prevailing supposition behind most diversity programs is that diversity will be enhanced if the sexism and racism of individual employees is confronted, challenged, and eliminated.[55] One finds it easy to question the soundness of training methods that are founded on the assumption that social justice can be created by dividing groups by skin color or gender and pitting them against each other. Respondents to one poll, titled "Diversity and Cross-Cultural Trainers: Do They Know What They're Doing?" concluded that 50% do not.[56]  So many organizations have suffered nightmarish results from diversity training experiences that there is now a second-

generation industry of diversity trainers who attempt to undo the damage created by other diversity trainers.[57]

A second set of repercussions caused by these diversity awareness training sessions is the contradictions and reinforced stereotypes that are presented during the sessions. Diversity training is supposed to foster harmony and understanding among participants. However, it may have the opposite effect, polarizing the workplace, stressing differences rather than unity, and exacerbating problems that already exist among employees.[58] On one hand, participants are told that it is unacceptable to base their actions on how they believe members of certain groups will react (i.e., they must *not* stereotype), yet in the same training, they are told that they must learn to judge individual behavior as an "expression of racial, sexual and cultural differences (i.e., they must stereotype)."[59]

Diversity trainers themselves have been found to be operating under unsupported assumptions regarding cultural traits. Many "diversity approved" stereotypes are noticeably close, or even identical, to common sexist and racist theories. According to Delikat, their offerings of false facts include varied generalizations, such as: all women are nurturing, consensus-seeking, and non-detail oriented; all men are power-hungry, confrontational, authoritarian, and hierarchical; all Asians are self-deprecating and demure.[60] The danger, Delikat further adds, is that even positive stereotypes can be harmful because they create barriers to looking at others as individuals rather than group members.

As if things were not already complicated enough for managers forced to decide when it is or is not appropriate to stereotype, the common sense "Golden Rule-based" management philosophy (do unto others as you would have them do unto you) is no longer a viable option as it pertains to diversity. One diversity trainee expressed the reason quite well lamenting: "minorities have gone from accusing whites of treating them differently when they are the same, to accusing whites of treating them the same when they are different."[61] Furthermore, Masters, Von Bergen, Soper, and Foster explain that the golden rule is ineffective with regard to diversity issues because it bases decisions on one's *own* perceptions and needs, disregarding the perspectives and prefer-ences of others.[62] The reality is that what one individual appreciates, another may despise. Fairness does not equal treating people the same.

Ann Morrison, director of the Center for Creative Leadership, stresses that minorities and whites cannot be evaluated with the same criteria because whites do not experience the same barriers faced by minorities.[63] Failure to recognize differences in perceptions based on race, gender, and power also may lead to legal difficulties. For example, the same joke which may be considered acceptable in some male work environments could lead to a sexual harassment lawsuit if told by a male supervisor to a female employee.[64] The same illus-tration can be applied to jokes about race, disability, religion, age, or sexual orientation, as may be said of sensitivity awareness conducted by diversity trainers.

# Increased legal liabilities

Numerous businesses have learned that, rather than the hoped for result of decreased exposure to legal liabilities, the wrong consultant using questionable training techniques can do immeasurable damage and can lead directly to legal difficulties.[65] Complaints that confrontational and unorthodox training techniques invade employee privacy and humiliate individuals in front of their co-workers are serious. Many have led to formal legal actions against employers who mandated the training.[66] Delikat, a partner in the law office of *Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe* in New York, warns of three primary dangers associated with diversity training:

- Racial, ethnic, or sex-based remarks made in diversity training sessions may be used in discrimination litigation as evidence of management bias,

- Employers may be forced to disclose the results of their "diversity audit" in pre-trial discovery,

- The diversity process may encourage groups or individuals to litigate.[67]

Recall the case of R.R. Donnelley & Sons. Donnelley's 3,500 black employees filed a class-action lawsuit as a result of training they had been subjected to—training that had been established as part of the settlement of a previous discrimination lawsuit![68]

The legal ramifications of negative diversity training are not isolated to a single incident. Lucky Stores, a California-based grocery chain, instituted diversity training in an effort to teach its employees to acknowledge and deal with their racist and sexist assumptions. As part of the training, store managers were asked by the trainer to express stereotypes about women and minorities. Notes taken during this session were allowed as evidence in a discrimination suit that followed the diversity training. Lucky Stores was found guilty, and the plaintiffs were awarded over $90 million in damages.[69, 70]

One of the most recent examples of diversity training increasing corporate legal liability is the Texaco story. Texaco found itself embroiled in accusations of discrimination after the release of secret recordings of conversations in which an executive compares African-Americans to jellybeans at the bottom of a jar. While this sounds very much like a racist remark, it was actually a direct reference to an analogy taught at a diversity workshop for Texaco employees. The incredible result was that MORE diversity training was recommended as a solution to the problem—which was caused by diversity training in the first place.[71]

Reverse discrimination has led to its share of case filings. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reports that 10,000 reverse discrimination cases (10% of which were determined to have merit) were filed during the period from 1987 to 1994. Even cases which eventually are judged to have no

basis in truth can still be damaging, as the allegations often receive significant media and political attention.[72]

With so many pitfalls, dangers, and negative effects associated with diversity management efforts, why initiate a diversity management program at all? Because, many organizations have found that their attempts at managing diversity succeed.[73, 74, 75, 76] These same successes can be experienced by other organizations if the process is implemented properly.

## What makes some diversity initiatives successful?

There seem to be several critical success factors involved in the diversity management process. Stephen Paskoff, director of Employment Learning Innovations, a company often called in to correct diversity management mistakes of others, believes that for training to have a positive impact, it should "focus on rules of civil behavior rather than trying to change people's beliefs."[77] The process should become a standard way of doing business as opposed to just a short-lived, one-time process.[78, 79] A pragmatic approach is more likely to lead to positive outcomes than an aggressive, in-your-face, dogmatic approach.[80] It is important to establish specific short-term and long-term diversity and training goals.[81] A broad definition of diversity should be established, and it must be based on inclusiveness.[82] It is important that top management demonstrate its full support, including designating a sufficient portion of the training budget toward the effort.[83] Organizations and agencies should choose a diversity consultant who is willing to provide a list of references willing to discuss their experiences with the consultant. Also, consultants should be willing to tailor their training to the company, including the preceding list of critical success factors.[84]

When successfully accomplished, diversity management facilitates better working relationships among employees, reduces costs, increases productivity, and boosts the bottom line.[85] Considering the adverse consequences of unsuccessful attempts, structuring a company's diversity management efforts right the first time is of the utmost importance.

## Summary

Handled improperly, diversity management can easily turn into a losing situation for all involved, leading to devaluation of employees who are perceived as culturally different, reverse discrimination against members of the majority group, demoralization and reinforcement of stereotypes, and increased exposure to legal risks. Fortunately, if approached properly, undertaking a diversity management initiative can result in a win-win situation for organizations and workers alike.

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[29] Nothing contained in this title [Title VII] shall be interpreted to require any employer...subject to this subchapter to grant preferential treatment to any individual or to any group because of the race, color, religion, sex, or national origin of such individual or group on account of an imbalance which may exist with respect to the total number or percentage of persons of any race, color, religion, sex, or national origin employed by any employer...in comparison with the total number or percentage of persons of such race, color, religion sex, or national origin in any community, State, section, or other area, or in the available work force in any community, State, section or other area. (42 *U.S.C.* 703(j))

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