

The Diversity Challenge: A Systematic Approach for Addressing Difference in Organizations

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Abstract

This paper develops a conceptual framework for understanding diversity with a sociohistorical underpinning. A dichotomy of primary and secondary diversity dimensions is provided. Race, ethnicity, and gender are suggested primary dimensions with socioeconomic status, age, and geography identified as secondary dimensions. A systematic approach for managing emerging issues of difference in organizations is developed. A five-step phased process representing a flexible approach for dealing with diversity-related issues is presented. It consists of assessing an organization's diversity status, conducting appropriate training, initiating interventions, and evaluating diversity-related progress.

Introduction

The American social landscape is rapidly changing. The 21st century presents extraordinary demographic alterations. Latinos have become the largest racial minority group, surpassing African Americans, after completion of the 2000 United States Census. By 2050, Asian Americans will experience a 300% increase in population size from 1990 and comprise 6% of the American population. Women will continue to outnumber men. Islam will become the third largest religious group in the United States. The over-class and under-class will dramatically increase and the middle-class will shrink. These facts represent a small snapshot of changes projected for American society.

The demographic trends will significantly impact the workplace result-

ing in a management challenge for a variety of private, government, and non-profit organizations. Increasing numbers of individuals from historically disenfranchised racial, gender, religious, and socioeconomic groups with limited work history will enter the workforce. Organizational effectiveness and efficiency are at stake if managers and supervisors do not successfully *mainstream* individuals from diverse backgrounds into the work environment.

A number of organizations and companies introduced programs aimed at addressing workplace diversity in the early 1990s. However, many of the attempts failed to progress beyond a *political correctness* agenda and, in some cases, had negative effects among workforce members. Failure to link diversity efforts to organizational management proved to cast these types of programs as special ventures outside of core management concerns. Poorly defined and administered, diversity programming has become an unfocused activity with questionable organizational value.

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Purpose

Diversity is the most critical issue facing the United States in the 21st Century. All other important economic, political, educational, and technological initiatives will depend on the American diversity climate. The purpose of this paper is to create a conceptual framework for understanding diversity and suggest a process for managing emerging issues of difference in organizations. The phased process represents a flexible approach for dealing with diversity-related issues. It encompasses personnel training matters, management issues, and the implementation of interventions that allow organizations to adjust to sociohistorical changes.

Diversity Dimensions

Diversity is a confusing and convoluted concept. Many have defined it as cultural variation within organizations and companies. Race and ethnicity are the critical elements of diversity with a cultural orientation. Others have equated diversity with multiculturalism. Most definitions associated with diversity are so narrowly focused that they are essentially useless for the organizational professional who is attempting to address this subject within his/her company. Diversity should be defined more broadly so that it can be applied to specific issues linked to an organization. Therefore, the following definition of diversity is offered:

A social difference that is considered important. It is either physical or socially created. Society must agree that the identified social differences exist.

Diversity is determined by social relationships between groups of indi-

viduals with geographic location as a key factor. Therefore, a number of differences beyond race, ethnicity, and gender, could be diversity determinants. Moreover, a variety of socially created or physical differences could be combined to create diverse groups within a community.

The United States is a nation composed of a multiplicity of social groups. Recent rhetoric from the political right and conservatives fantasizes about an America without distinctions such as Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, disabled Americans, etc. This orientation is often characterized by the phrase, "why can't we just all be American?" American history from the War of Independence to the present clearly shows this country was founded on group differences. History demonstrates that group differences have been used to establish a foundation for larger consensus necessary for creating nationalism. Simultaneously, differences have also been used to divide groups and cause social crisis. For example, the First Continental Congress voted to make English the *unofficial* language for the nation. This action divided groups and especially enraged German descendents (two votes the other way by the Congress and the unofficial language would have been German). Using English as the unofficial language also provided a tangible point of consensus from which to build United States citizenship and nationalism (Rose, 1997).

To better understand diversity, it can be arranged into two dimensions. The first is the primary dimension. It is characterized as a physical or social difference in which society places extraordinary importance. Elaborate categories

of individuals are established and structurally maintained. The other is identified as the secondary dimension. It is used to separate individuals into categories, also. However, its physical or social characteristic is perceived as less important than those associated with primary diversity dimensions. Secondary dimensions are often more regional in application. Table 1 illustrates the primary and secondary dimensions along with group characteristics and examples.

If you were to ask the *average* American what comes to mind when queried about diversity, one of three characteristics often comes to mind. These are race, ethnic group, and gender and they

comprise the primary dimensions of diversity. Our nation's history regarding social inequality has been guided by the employment of these three dimensions. The importance of each has fluctuated over the past 300 years and this will be addressed later.

Race can be defined as the physical differences that lead to categorization of people. The physical differences are primarily based on skin color distinctions (Van de Berghe, 1967). These are artificial creations based on the variety of melanin in the skin. It should be pointed out that race as utilized in American society is not based on biological determinants but social definitions of perceived skin color differences (Rose,

Table 1

Diversity Dimensions, Characteristics, and Examples.

<i>Type</i>	<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Example of Groups</i>
<i>Primary Dimension</i>			
	Race	Social definition of skin color	White, Yellow, Red, Brown Black
	Ethnic Group	Skin color and language, culture nationality	Polish-American, Italian-American, Mexican-American, Japanese-American
	Gender	Social definition of roles based on sex	Female, Male
<i>Secondary Dimension</i>			
	Age	Social definition of aging	Baby Boomer, Generation X, Generation Y
	Disability	Physical or mental abilities/disabilities	Abled, Disabled
	Sexual Orientation	Social definition of sexual orientation	Heterosexual, Homosexual, Bisexual, Nonsexual
	Socioeconomic Status	Income, Education, and Occupation	Upper Class, Middle Class, Lower Class, Underclass
	Religion	Religion differences	Protestant, Catholic, Islam, Jewish, None
	Geographic Location	Neighborhood differences	Northsider, Westsider, Eastsider, Uptown, Downtown

1997). In the United States, there are five socially determined racial groups: White, Yellow, Brown, Red, and Black.

Ethnic group is often associated with race and combines skin color differences with language, culture, or nationality (Nagel, 1994). As a result, a racial group is often composed of two or more ethnic groups. For example, the Brown racial group is comprised of Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, Puerto-Ricans, and individuals from Central and South America. The most ethnically diverse racial group in the United States is White Americans. Interestingly, more than 150 ethnic groups from Europe have amalgamated since the early 1700s to form the group many identify as whites or Caucasians in America.

The racial composition of the United States is in transition. Historically, social scientists have viewed racial issues from a white/black dichotomy. However, increases in the Hispanic American and Asian American populations over the last 20 years have led to a more multiracial focus. Table 2 illustrates the dramatic changes as the Hispanic American resident composition has grown from less than 7% in 1980 to nearly 11% in 2000. For Asian Americans, population composition rose to approximately 4% of the overall American resident total in 2000.

During the 20-year period, the white population declined from 81% to about 74% of the population. The African American population percentage remained relatively stable at 11%.

Gender represents the social significance a society attaches to the biological categories of female and male. Individuals learn the socially assigned role for each category. Therefore, females and males typically have decidedly distinct roles in society (Lengermann and Wallace, 1985). Women constitute slightly more than half of the population in the United States. Table 3 shows this pattern has remained relatively unchanged since 1980.

There are a variety of secondary diversity dimensions. These include but are not limited to age, sexual orientation, physical disability, socioeconomic status, geographic location, family orientation, and religion. All can be taken into account to some extent to understand race, ethnic, and gender differences.

The Importance of Diversity

Social inequality in the United States is predicated on primary and secondary diversity dimensions. As the country moves through the first few decades of the 21st century, more than eight in 10 individuals entering the workforce will be women, people of col-

Table 2

United States Resident Population Distribution in Percentages for 1980, 1990, and 2000.

<i>Year</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>Hispanic American</i>	<i>Asian American</i>	<i>Naive American</i>	<i>Total (in thousands)</i>
1980	80.7	11.1	6.5	1.5	0.2	241,155
1990	76.9	11.3	8.3	2.8	0.7	271,171
2000	73.5	11.5	10.6	3.7	0.7	307,785

or, immigrants, or political refugees from Central or South America. Successful organizations must factor social inequality into business and employment decisions. The changing population dynamics in the United States will cause an interesting dilemma for organizations. As the population becomes more diverse, individuals from groups that have been historically located at the margins of society will possess the skills to perform jobs or attend institutions of higher learning. However, their understanding of the organizational culture will be problematic and interpersonal communication and appropriate attire will become important issues.

The following incident illustrates the dilemma of individual skills versus understanding the organizational environment and how to adequately address it. In 1992, a North Texas suburban city posted an administrative aide position. The job prerequisites were a high school diploma and the ability to work in a contemporary office environment. A 19-year-old African American man, who had recently graduated from a Fort Worth area high school, applied for the position and successfully interviewed. On the first day of employment, he came to work wearing a black pair of slacks, an open-collar polo style shirt, some ankle length athletic socks with thongs, and a shower cap over his hairdo. He was promptly suspended. Management officials and an outside consultant met with the young man to resolve the problem. As a result, it was determined that he was virtually *clueless* regarding dress codes and appropriate attire in the office environment. Through coaching he quickly learned

the rules and became a successful employee, earning two promotions within three years. This situation led the city to add a 30-minute segment to the new employee orientation regarding appropriate attire in the workplace.

Addressing Diversity In Organizations

Organizations must address diversity issues systematically. *One-shot diversity programs* do not work and can result in employee resentment and conflict. The best strategy for addressing diversity issues is to develop a process that integrates these issues into an organization's *core structure*. Much of what is identified as diversity in public and private organizations can be defined as management-related issues. Therefore, diversity issues should become a focal point from a management standpoint and adjustments must be made to enable organizations to enhance their effectiveness and efficiency. Although there may be a variety of ways to approach diversity management, it must be viewed as a dynamic process. Diversity management consists of a *five-phase process* (see Diagram 1).

Assessing the Diversity Climate

The initial phase involves identifying the organization's needs with respect

Table 3

United States Resident Population
Distribution in Percentages
for 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Year	Male	Female	Total (in thousands)
1980	48.6	51.4	224,546
1990	48.7	51.3	248,791
2000	48.9	51.1	275,306

to diversity concerns. This first step comprises addressing key questions such as: Does the organization need diversity training? Which employees should be targeted for training? What type of diversity training should be offered? Additionally, the organization must determine what constitutes major diversity concerns within its structure. Ascertaining the diversity climate can be accomplished through obtaining input from employees or clients. The use of survey questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, focus groups, or pertinent organizational records represent appropriate methods for collecting valuable diversity information.

Conducting Diversity Training

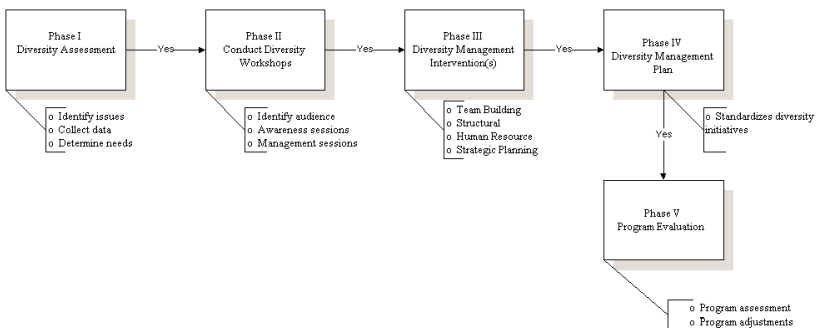
The second phase is comprised of creating and conducting diversity training sessions. These sessions can either be directed to general diversity awareness or diversity management. Diversity awareness sessions are aimed at introducing the participant to important diversity issues in the work environment and the role difference plays in individual and group dynamics. Awareness attempts to create an organizational envi-

ronment based on tolerance for group and individual differences. Eventually tolerance will assist in the evolution of a corporate culture that embraces acceptance. Critical for diversity awareness is the improvement of communication across groups.

Rynes and Rosen (1994) assessed diversity programs in for-profit organizations and evaluated components that make them successful. They found that in a survey of organizations one-third indicated some form of diversity training had been presented to employees. However, most companies said their firms devote more than 10% of the training budget on diversity issues. In addition, the most common topics addressed in diversity training sessions involve assumptions about groups, the need for fairness and equal treatment, and interplay between diversity, equal opportunity, and affirmative action. Relatively little emphasis is placed on leadership responsibility, changing the work environment, and creating diversity management accountability.

Diversity management training emphasizes techniques and skills for

Diagram 1. Process for addressing diversity in organizations.



successfully operating in a changing workplace environment. This training focuses on the development of an organizational environment based on equality of opportunity. As a result, group differences play a lesser role in organizational decisions and members take responsibility for becoming competitive relative to promotions, assignments, etc. Diversity management training is the more difficult of the two approaches. It has the potential of changing the organizational cultural and creating a more inclusive environment. Therefore, it represents a potent threat to the organizational *status quo*.

In a recent study of a Fortune 500 company, promotion rates were analyzed regarding black and white mid-level financial managers. It was found that although both groups received similar levels of training, education, and mentoring within the company, white managers tended to have higher promotion rates. These findings suggest that subjective, invisible rules operate within the company (James, 2000). Diversity management training needs to address the objective and subjective elements within an organization. These comprise major components of the organizational culture.

Organizational Interventions

The third phase entails the introduction of interventions. These initiatives are aimed at improving organizational effectiveness and efficiency. This phase seeks to identify and implement diversity interventions that will improve the organization and create management accountability for diversity issues. A variety of interventions can be introduced to include human resource,

strategic planning, and management initiatives. Human resource interventions may involve revising position descriptions, reviewing job application processes, or adjusting job evaluation systems.

Diversity Management Planning

Phase four entails the development of a diversity management plan. This involves the creation of diversity management goals, strategies (action steps), and milestones with time lines for accomplishing them. Organizations that utilize diversity management plans usually implement them within a 5- to 10-year time frame.

Program Assessment

This last phase involves systematic assessment of the diversity process. An outside evaluation is very important for assisting the organization in proactively addressing diversity and making it an important part of core management activities. A combination of qualitative and quantitative information should be utilized to render an assessment of diversity initiatives. This information should be clearly linked to goals that comprise the diversity management plan. An annual evaluation is often an appropriate organizational decision.

Concluding Remarks

Diversity issues should be given careful management consideration by all types of organizations in the United States. The changing population dynamics will greatly alter the racial, ethnic, gender, and age composition within this country over the next several decades. As a result, the employee, recruitment, and client bases will change for most organizations. Although most

of the changes will be gradual, rapidly growing states such as Texas, California, Colorado, and Florida will see more dramatic composition changes. Managers and supervisors will need to plan for change to maintain organizational competitiveness. Providing only *political correctness lip service* to diversity awareness and management will have disastrous consequences for organizations.

This five-phase management process can be very successful relative to addressing employee diversity. However, the process must be supported from the top of the organizational structure and managers at all levels must be held accountable in order for diversity management to be successful. Additionally, organizations need to include managing diversity in their overall strategic planning process.

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