

## Fundamentals of Diversity

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Many organizations have introduced diversity initiatives and programs as part of their objectives. However, why have diversity programs not yielded enormous success and why are organizations still struggling with this topic? In this article, I discuss the different approaches to dealing with diversity initiatives and suggestions on what organizations can do to have a truly diverse workforce. This includes tapping into internal resources, self-reflection and openness to a mindset change.

### Why diversify?

The need to diversify has many arguments, including the business and moral reasons. A number of companies espouse that there is a positive impact on their profits by having a diverse workforce, from either benefiting from the different ideas that are brought in or by tapping into markets that were previously inaccessible. Others argue that diversity is morally good. One thing is certain; the need to diversify is becoming more and more apparent as the demographic makeup of our society is changing and as we learn to work together.

### Different Approaches

Organizations have approached diversity in a number of ways. One approach which I have seen quite often is to set targets for filling new hires with under-represented groups. Another approach, which is used very often by marketing groups, is to match employees of a specific background to the market for which they are targeting. The rationale behind this is that these employees understand the target market better than any other group and therefore would increase market penetration. As part of either of these two approaches, these underrepresented groups would be developed and primed for specific management jobs in the future. In addition, employee-wide training on diversity has been used by organizations to help sensitize employees to these issues. What usually happens in organizations is that the diversity efforts diverge into two paths: underrepresented groups become assimilated into the mainstream culture or divisions across groups become wider and wider.

In my experience, large-scale programs that only attempt at increasing the numbers of a certain group often fail to create diversity. First, what do I mean by the term “diversity”? Diversity needs to be thought of within a larger framework. Many diversity programs

address underrepresented groups in terms of age, sex and ethnicity. Although these factors are externally noticeable criteria when measuring the effectiveness of a diversity program, it limits one's understanding of the breadth of what a diverse workforce can actually contribute to an organization; age, sex and/or ethnicity should not be the only measurements. One needs to think beyond these measurements although they are influential in determining each person's value system.

An organization that is truly diverse will support individuals with different experiences, backgrounds and value system, and the employees within the organization will understand and respect the differences that each person brings. Moreover, the individuals may not necessarily be in agreement with the different perspective(s) brought in by each member, but they will at least learn to integrate the differences in dealing with issues at work. Herein lies the key point. Organizations that embrace diversity benefit from different approaches to tackling problems and providing solutions to issues.

With this new definition in mind, what can organizations do to ensure there is truly a diverse workforce and that differences are valued?

The prerequisite for any organization is to think of and plan for diversity efforts as a long-term initiative. It is not a short-term fix that can be handled as an end-of-year performance measurement, where filling numbers and other quantitative criteria are analyzed and calculated. It does however require everyone in an organization to undergo a change – it is a change in mindset, a change in approach and, most importantly, thorough self-reflection on everyone's part. The fruits of these initiatives may not even be measurable within a short period of time. Self-reflection is important in this process. As Wexley concluded in his studies titled, the “Similar to Me” effect, the influence in the perceptual similarity between a manager and his/her subordinate cannot be overlooked. In fact, perceptual similarity led to higher ratings for job suitability and performance appraisals. Therefore, if this is the case, we need to be aware constantly of our own blind spots and biases.

1. Senior management is a good reflection of the values and behaviors that an organization will have. Be aware of who are in those roles and what their backgrounds are. Determine whether or not the senior management is diverse enough (i.e. different views and approaches to issues). As we all know, each organization has its own unique corporate culture, but within this entity there is a richness of variety in people. Have you ever noticed that within an organization, there tend to be unique sub-cultures? In order to diversify the senior management level, individuals need to be selected from within the organization who have different backgrounds and placed into upper management roles. By deliberately positioning these individuals in an upper management role, one may create a desired domino effect. I have seen examples where these individuals will then develop and identify with like-minded individuals, thus creating a self-perpetuating process.

The key is to select individuals in their mid-career level. The rationale behind this is that individuals who have been promoted from within over the years are most likely very similar to their superiors and upper management within the organization; that is, they have assimilated into the mainstream culture of the organization and have learned which qualities, such as behavioral norms, are needed to be in upper management.

2. The identification of talent through external recruitment, talent review and performance management processes are channels through which an organization can address diversity.

When hiring externally or promoting individuals from within the organization, each decision made is a statement as to the cultural norms to be represented. Typically, the “talent review process” in many companies involves line managers and Human Resources recognizing talented candidates based upon certain selection criteria that reflect leadership or managerial qualities. Sometimes, these criteria are inconsistent throughout the organization and may be based on rather subjective information or interpretation. Thus, although the intention for diversity may be in good faith, one should not be surprised if those individuals whom you find to be appropriate for a position may be so only because your understanding of what constitutes leadership values and/or appropriate behaviors is similar to what you are already familiar with.

The identification of talent or selection for an open position is based upon feedback from a combination of direct managers, peers, subordinates and Human Resources personnel. Criteria for promotion are usually based upon past performance and the qualities and values that the individual has exhibited in his/her current and/or past positions. Decisions are made based upon what the individuals in the room feel mirrors their own perception of what qualities would be needed for certain roles. Our perceptions are influenced by each of our experiences and backgrounds. In essence, they are promoting themselves. What would be the incentive for a line manager to promote someone not within his own mold or whose communication style he cannot seem to read or understand? This would obviously be a riskier option.

Therefore, during the talent review process and when recruiting individuals from outside the organization, we need to be sure to involve a good mix of people with varied backgrounds/experiences in the assessment and decision making process. Human Resources and line managers from the relevant functional area should be involved, as well as members from other areas; that is, everyone’s ideas may provide insight and perspective into the individual’s assessment for potential. In contrast, those with a one-dimensional viewpoint may bring single dimensionality to the evaluation process.

In addition, it would be wise to ensure that the individuals involved in the internal talent identification and external recruitment have relatively the same power base within the organization and, thus, equal degree of influence in the decision-making. Ideally, one

prefers to avoid the situation where one individual alone may exert a major influence in the decision process since he/she is someone to whom everyone reports. For example, a vocal superior may bias the process into selecting or promoting a candidate that fits his mold. In order to provide some equality and fairness in the decision process, the individuals in the room should not be fearful of voicing their opinion.

### Conclusion

In summary, as organizations continue to tackle the issue of diversity, Human Resources and management will need to approach diversity and related programs with a refreshed perspective. This includes individual self-reflection regarding possible blind spots, biases and impact of one's actions on the broader corporate culture. By drawing upon the tools as illustrated above, companies will begin to step closer to being truly diverse. One can only imagine the impact on productivity and innovation for an organization that embraces differences.