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## Impact of Mandatory Diversity Training: Lessons from a Private University

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- |   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>An Investigation of the Innovation and Integration Capacity of U.S. Health Care Organizations</b>  | <b>2</b>   |
| <i>Dawn E. Bowden</i>   |            |
| <b>Student Versus Employer Perceptions of College Graduate Skills</b>   | <b>47</b>  |
| <i>Lawrence Roth, Sohel Ahmad, &amp; Richard J. Sebastian</i>   |            |
| <b>Using General Systems Theory as a Business Application Paradigm</b>  | <b>57</b>  |
| <i>Vincent O'Rourke</i>   |            |
| <b>Impact of Mandatory Diversity Training: Lessons from a Private University</b>  | <b>74</b>  |
| <i>Patrick O'Leary, Randy L. Richards, &amp; Thomas J. Quinlan Jr.</i>  |            |
| <b>Emotional Intelligence Founded Transformational Leadership Traits: The Impact of Gender, Tenure, and Organization Position Among Virtual Workers</b> | <b>83</b>  |
| <i>Michael Charles Hitson</i>   |            |
| <b>Smart Mobile Devices and Competitive Strategy: A Resource-Based Perspective</b>  | <b>95</b>  |
| <i>David J. Boggs &amp; Eric P. Arseneau</i>  |            |
| <b>Governors as CEOs: An Evolution</b>  | <b>106</b> |
| <i>Jennie Carter Thomas &amp; Richard L. Churchman</i>  |            |
| <b>Guidelines for Contributors</b>  | <b>117</b> |

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## **Impact of Mandatory Diversity Training: Lessons from a Private University**

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*Abstract: Attendance at diversity training programs is often dictated by management, and participants find themselves caught between their genuine desire to broaden their understanding of the subject and resentment at being forced to do so. The outcomes of these mandatory training programs have not been systematically assessed. This study looks at the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral impacts of attending such a program and finds valuable lessons learned and cautious room for optimism.*

While numerous books, workshops, and college courses provide information on understanding and managing diversity (Miller & Katz, 2002; Thiederman, 2003), there remains a paucity of research on the impact of diversity training on interpersonal behaviors generally (Nemetz & Christensen, 1996; Sanchez & Medkik, 2004).

This stems from a lack of discussion in the literature regarding the desired behavioral outcomes of such training (Gutierrez, Kruzich, Jones, & Coronado, 2000). To date, the literature has primarily focused on development of conceptual frameworks for understanding diversity (De Meuse & Hostager, 2001; Mandell & Kohler-Gray, 1990) or on broad approaches for managing it (Cox, 1993; Rynes & Rosen, 1994). The lack of attention to desired outcomes has led to frustration among human resource managers, with more than two-thirds of them rating their diversity training efforts as unsuccessful (Wheeler, 1994).

The motivation and content of diversity training has evolved from one of compliance (mid-1960s to early 1980s) to improving working relationships (mid-1980s to mid-1990s) to a more recent focus on accepting and leveraging all dimensions of diversity based on the belief that enhanced business performance will result (Anand & Winters, 2008). This repositioning of diversity as an interpersonal competency has created a paradigm shift from the assumption that only certain groups – such as white men – require training, to one where all employees need to be more cross-culturally competent. This competence affects organizational viability and profitability through more creative decision making, reduced diversity-related conflict, improved cross-cultural understanding, and more functional interpretation of pluralistic differences (Combs & Luthans, 2007).

Like corporations, colleges and universities are embracing diversity. Predominantly white liberal arts colleges are renewing their commitment to maintain a welcoming and diverse community of students, faculty, and staff. Nationally, 71 percent of Americans think diversity education helps bring people together but 65 percent believe that colleges and universities are not doing a good job if their graduates cannot get along in a diverse population (DYG Inc., 1998). Responsive institutions have used diversity training not just to advance their goal of social justice but also as a means to promote greater engagement among students, faculty and staff. Davis (2002) notes that the most successful academic communities employ proactive programs to improve diversity while Brown and Duguid (2002) claim that they are inhabited by people who share common tasks, obligations, and goals.

For smaller institutions, shifting to a more heterogeneous student body and workforce is rarely an easy experience. Private, religiously affiliated colleges and universities face a particularly difficult dilemma. The more top management wants its members to accept its core values and inherited culture, the harder it becomes to demonstrate support for strong differences amongst students, faculty, and staff. While a greater variety of perspectives may enhance creativity and lead to better decisions, it can also result in increased distrust and conflict, lower job satisfaction and higher turnover (Milliken & Martins, 1996).

## **INSTITUTION**

My University is a private, 4-year university in the Catholic tradition. Of the 1600 or so independent college and universities in the United States, about half are considered to be church-affiliated. Of these, 221 are Catholic (U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006). From its beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, My University welcomed students from all religious faiths, ethnic backgrounds and economic circumstances, unusual for Catholic schools at the time. These values of inclusiveness continued to evolve through the 20<sup>th</sup> century with evening classes being offered to non-traditional students in the 1920s and women admitted in the 1930s. Today, the university has some 4,000 students, of which 45 percent are over 23 years of age, 50 percent come from rural communities, and 7.6 percent are minorities. It employs some 200 faculty and 250 staff and offers several graduate programs.

## **TRAINING PROGRAM**

In 2007, in a legal settlement, the university committed itself to a one-day, 8-hour, diversity training program for all its employees. This is in keeping with the findings of Gutierrez et al, (2000) who found that legal pressures have been the dominant drivers in diversity training expansion.

Typically, such programs emphasize heightened awareness over skill development (Rynes & Rosen, 1995). Such awareness programs are inexpensive, relatively easy to conduct, and can be used in a wide variety of contexts (Roberson, Kulik, & Pepper, 2003). The training conducted at MY University claimed to combine both approaches with awareness training presented first to realize the strategic benefit of connecting with a diverse range of people and second skill training to acquire the skills to repair any damaged relationships resulting from insensitivity to the other's differences.

These twin objectives formed the basis of the training curriculum which included interactive cross-cultural simulation, a presentation showing what happens when people are unconsciously discriminated against, an exercise in false perception, case scenarios, an intercultural learning activity, discussion and analysis of the "Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes" video. (The now famous video traces the controversial experiment by a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher at an all-white school in Iowa in 1968. The students were branded inferior or superior based solely upon the color of their eyes and received a startling lesson on discrimination). The training ended with an 'economic summit' game which sought to impart the value of trust.

A subgroup of 42 participants agreed to participate in a longitudinal study. This subgroup completed the evaluation one week after the training and again three months later. Of these, 14 were men and 28 women; 14 were faculty and 28 were staff. The median age was 50. The only other demographic data collected was length of service.

## METHODOLOGY

A total of 450 faculty and staff participated in the training workshops. At the end of the training, attendees were asked to evaluate the program and the trainers. This instrument focused on content, delivery, currency, as well as cognitive and attitudinal outcomes. Based on these evaluations, the overwhelming majority of participants stated that the training was effective in meeting its immediate goals.

To evaluate the short-term and intermediate effects of the training, the authors developed a new instrument. We sought to measure cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral changes towards co-workers as a result of the training. The instrument resembles the Workplace Diversity Survey created by De Meuse and Hostager (2001) but replaces the broad and amorphous term 'diversity,' with the more immediate and tangible 'co-workers who are different.' Specifically, it asked participants to rate the training in accomplishing the following:

- increasing their understanding of co-workers who are different
- changing their attitudes towards co-workers who are different
- providing the skills necessary to treat such co-workers with sensitivity
- imbuing them with commitment to change their behaviors towards co-workers who are different
- imbuing their friends with commitment to change their attitudes and behaviors towards co-workers who are different
- providing the university as a whole with commitment to become more inclusive

The second part of the survey asked if respondents had received disrespectful treatment at work, and if they had caused offense or embarrassment to co-workers. Finally, they were asked to specify behavioral changes, if any, they intended to make. Identical questions were asked – in the past tense – in the follow-up evaluation taken 90 days later.

The survey was structured as perceptions of the course and perceptions of self. A Principal Components Analysis (PCA) was run separately on both evaluations. Three components emerged. The first included the six statements described as "Perception of the training program." The first four statements isolated themselves definitively to this group, and there was some overlap with the other groups on statements five and six. Statements seven and eight are clearly separated into groups two and three. These two statements are in the block labeled "Perceptions of self." Question 7 is a "victim" question, and Question 8 is self-indicting, or a "guilt" question. In other words, they are of a different nature, and are considered separately.

## RESULTS

This survey was conducted immediately after a diversity training program. A follow-up survey was taken three months later. Since no pre-program survey was taken, the statements relating to perceptions of the training program cannot be used to evaluate the immediate effects of the course. However, it is possible to evaluate the lingering effects of the course by using the first and second survey results.

Paired difference t-tests were used to compare responses from the two evaluations.<sup>1</sup> These showed statistically significant differences for the following statements:<sup>2</sup>

2. This program changed my attitudes towards co-workers who are different from me.

5. As a result of this program, I expect my work friends to make changes in their behavior towards co-workers who are different from them.

7. I have experienced disrespectful treatment from co-workers due to my differences from them.

8. I have caused offense or embarrassment to co-workers.

The remaining questions/statements showed no statistically significant differences and are not addressed.

### Summary

Statements	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Mean difference	0.050	0.350	0.050	-0.200	-0.550	-0.105	-1.105	-0.632
p-value	0.358	0.045	0.402	0.214	0.019	0.315	0.001	0.024
Result		Improved attitude			Friends have not made behavioral changes		Incidents of disrespect have lessened	Personal comportment has improved

Negative mean differences show tendency toward disagreement with a statement. Blanks in the result row mean there were no statistically significant changes.

Statements 2 and 5 involve perceptions of the training program.

Statement 2. This program changed my attitudes towards co-workers who are different from me (p = 0.045)

In terms of age, three usable groups emerged: 40 and younger; 41-50, and older than 50. The only age group to show a difference was those 40 years of age or less. The change was positive, indicating that the younger age groups may have taken the lessons to heart. The survey did not indicate any change in attitude for those over the age of 40, nor for any other demographic category.

Statement 5. As a result of this program, I expect my work friends to make changes in their behavior towards co-workers who are different from them (p-value = 0.019).

Findings for statement 5 were negative. Ninety days after the training, respondents suggest that desired behavioral changes in friends did not materialize. On a gender basis, male respondents showed no significant differences on this statement while female respondents showed significant differences. It appears that women account for the bulk of the changes. Those respondents over 50 years of age suggest that nothing has changed in this respect. For length of service, statistically significant findings came from those with less than 5 years employment at the university. The newer employees did not perceive that

<sup>1</sup> In case t-test assumptions were not met, the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was used. The results were the same with p-values ranging from 0.015 to 0.026.

<sup>2</sup> These questions are from the initial set taken immediately after the program was finished.

expected behavioral changes had occurred among their co-workers. Regarding behavior of friends, 53 percent expected less change from their friends after three months than immediately following the workshop.

Statements 7 and 8 refer to perceptions of self.

Statement 7. I have experienced disrespectful treatment from co-workers due to my differences from them (p-value = 0.001).

For both faculty and staff, incidents of disrespect had diminished ( $p = 0.038$  for faculty and  $0.020$  for staff). The findings were similar for those over 50 years of age ( $p = 0.003$ ) and for those with less than 5 years employment ( $p = 0.033$ ). 68 percent of the respondents saw a decrease in disrespectful treatment from co-workers.

Statement 8. I have caused offense or embarrassment to co-workers ( $p = 0.024$ ).

For length of service, the most significant differences came from those with less than 5 years employment ( $p = 0.049$ ). Respondents who first acknowledged that they might have caused offense to others believe that they have changed their ways and no longer are the cause of offense to others. In the follow-up survey, respondents deny even more strongly that they, personally, had caused offense to others. 47 percent of the respondents perceived improvement in their own treatment of co-workers.

Specific behavior statements (7 and 8) revealed an increased awareness of situations that might cause offense and increased efforts toward more effective two-way communication.

Open-ended (narrative response) questions:

Question 9: If you intend to change your behavior as a result of this program, please provide one or two examples of those changes.

Question 10: What else would you like to tell us about this training program?

Responses to these questions suggest that the program had many limitations. Themes that emerged were lack of relevance to academia, misrepresentation of the course as "new and different," eight hours being too long, and the inappropriateness of the "economic summit" game. Several noted the lack of enthusiasm of others in their sessions, and their unwillingness or inability to participate in activities as a team.

Part of this can be attributed to the biases of self-presentation and social desirability – how people think of themselves in relation to others. For example, ninety days after the training, 39 percent of respondents said they had made behavioral changes as a result of the program. Of that 39 percent, less than a quarter expected their friends to make changes in their behavior, and only a handful provided specific examples of their own adjustments, such as: listening better; not interpreting silence as rejection; teaching a coworker how to do certain tasks; and "avoiding those who make me uncomfortable."

Overall, we found that the training program improved understanding of the issue, but had no significant impact on real or perceived behaviors. We also found scant difference between the short-term and intermediate effects of diversity training.

## IMPLICATIONS

The results of this paper do not imply that diversity training is a waste of time. Rather, they indicate that one size does not fit all and that careful needs assessment is a necessary prerequisite for success. Gilbert and Ivancevich (2000) found that few diversity training programs are preceded by a thorough needs assessment of organization, tasks and people. Good needs assessment should include input from staff at a variety of organizational levels (Gutierrez et al., 2000). This not only clarifies what kind of change is needed, but at what level and for whom.

Nemetz and Christensen, (1996) found that diversity training is most likely to lead to attitudinal and behavioral change when participants have not already formed strong prejudices, negative peer pressure is removed, and there is an organizational culture that supports appreciation of multiculturalism. Wentling and Palma-Rivas (1998) suggest that college leaders consider the following as key diversity training components: management commitment and support; inclusion in strategic planning; attention to specific organizational needs; qualified trainers; mandatory attendance; inclusiveness; trust and confidentiality; accountability; and clearly focused evaluation.

In addition to changing myths about the subject (e.g. it's just code for affirmative action), diversity training must also offer ways to respond to the challenges of valuing and managing it in the workplace (Tan, Morris, & Romero, 1996). Rynes and Rosen (1995) note that diversity-related problems don't necessarily spring from lack of awareness. Rather, proponents of change may lack the specific behavioral guidelines required to bring about the desired behavioral changes. Proven post-training practices such as behavioral coaching and follow-up sessions (Sanchez & Medkik, 2004) were lacking. In addition to the cognitive skills necessary to understand those who are 'different,' trainees must be given the opportunities to develop the social and perceptual skills to navigate those differences and assume the best of others.

Managing diversity has to be a continuing process, not an isolated, one-shot awareness treatment (Sanchez & Medkik, 2004). A comprehensive review of 31 years of data from 830 mid-size to large U.S. workplaces found that mandatory programs - often undertaken with an eye to avoiding liability in discrimination lawsuits - are ineffective and even counterproductive in increasing the number of women and minorities in managerial positions (Kalev, 2009). The study also found that when diversity training is voluntary and undertaken to advance a company's business goals, it was associated with increased diversity in management.

Real change in attitudes and behaviors follows an evolutionary, not revolutionary, path and requires a commitment of time, people, and resources. For many employees, the behavioral changes needed to accommodate diversity follow a similar trajectory to those of any innovation - evolving through the stages of knowledge acquisition, to attitude formation, to a decision to adopt, to implementation, to confirmation that the decision was correct. Management should no longer assume that diversity training programs are successful in and of themselves (Hostager & De Meuse, 2002) and must strive to align the diversity effort with other changes taking place. If the desired change does not fit well with the existing culture and have the support of day-to- leadership, it is usually destined to fail.

## **APPENDIX – SURVEY QUESTIONS\***

This program increased my understanding of co-workers who are different from me.

This program changed my attitudes towards co-workers who are different from me.

This program provided me with the skills necessary to treat co-workers who are different from me with sensitivity and understanding.

As a result of this program, I intend to make changes in my behavior toward co-workers who are different from me.

As a result of this program, I expect my workplace friends to make changes in their behavior toward co-workers who are different from them.

As a result of this program, I expect the college community to become more inclusive and accommodating of differences

I have experienced disrespectful treatment at work due to my difference/s from co-workers.

I have caused offense or embarrassment to co-workers, without perhaps intending to.

If you intend to change your behavior as a result of this program, please provide one or two examples of those changes.

What else would you like to tell us about this training program?

\*Questions were changed to past tense for follow-up survey

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