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## Creating a Diversity and Inclusion Training Program

By Paula Fernandes, Contributing Writer November 12, 2019

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It seems that every couple of weeks we hear of a customer racially profiled while shopping at a well-known store or a huge executive shuffle brought on by an employee blowing the whistle on a company's toxic corporate culture. Though businesses of all sizes have made significant strides in becoming more inclusive and diverse over the last few decades, it's still a struggle for many to overcome the biases that limit how some employees see those who are different from themselves.

One way to create more welcoming workplaces that respect differences and give a voice to people who are often underrepresented is through the implementation of company diversity and inclusion training programs.

Diversity and inclusion training has the potential to positively address biases and prejudice within organizations, according to Katerina Bezrukova, co-author of a [study](#) that examined 40 years of research on diversity training and an associate professor at the [University of Buffalo's School of Management](#).

These benefits can lead to some real financial gains for companies as well, according to recent [research](#) by McKinsey & Company. According to its study, organizations with diverse

workforces are 35% more likely to have above-average profit margins than companies with more homogenous employee bases.

"A well-designed [diversity and inclusion] training program can elevate employee morale, boost customer satisfaction and drive bottom-line business success," said Pamela Pujo, a diversity thought leader at [Affirmity](#) who also serves on the Greater Dallas Advisory Board to the Texas Diversity Council. "The benefit of a [diversity and inclusion] training program will encourage increased collaboration, enhanced interpersonal skills, and empower underrepresented groups to feel more valued and respected in the workplace."

However, to arrive at these successful outcomes, you must carry out the training responsibly.

"At best, it can engage and retain women and people of color in the workplace, but at worst, it can backfire and reinforce stereotypes," said Bezrukova [in a statement](#).

"Sometimes, [diversity and inclusion] training reinforces differences between people rather than providing the needed insight and instruction on how to work effectively together," added Pujo.

To help you avoid some of these pitfalls, here are some tips for getting the most out of your diversity training.

## **1. Develop an understanding of diversity and inclusion training.**

Establishing a diversity and inclusion training program for your organization starts with developing a clear, detailed definition of what the program should. A comprehensive diversity and inclusion training program provides concrete ways to engage in respectful and positive interactions in the workplace, while reducing discrimination and prejudice based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, age, religion, physical and mental ability, and socioeconomic status.

Diversity and inclusion training programs should target all employees and address a range of issues, including unconscious bias, microaggressions and cross-cultural communications. Sound training moves beyond simply encouraging employees to tolerate differences to teaching employees how to work well together while embracing diverse perspectives.

"It should tie diversity and inclusion to the vision, mission, values and goals of the organization, and then move into how to value all aspects of diversity with co-workers, clients, customers and the community at large," said Stan Kimer, president of [Total Engagement Consulting by Kimer](#).

"Appropriate and effective diversity and inclusion training can mitigate legal risks and bolster affirmative defenses, support ongoing recruitment and retention efforts, and contribute to a more productive workplace," added Weldon Latham, a principal with [Jackson Lewis](#) and chairman of the firm's Corporate Diversity Counseling Practice Group.

## **2. Extend and maintain diversity and inclusion training over time.**

For diversity training to be as successful as possible, it needs to be delivered over an extended period of time. According to Bezrukova's study, diversity training had positive effects on employees' knowledge, attitudes and behaviors toward diverse groups, but over time, their attitudes regressed to what they were before the training.

"The attitudes this training attempts to change are generally strong, emotion-driven and tied to our personal identities, and we found little evidence that long-term effects to them are sustainable," Bezrukova said. "However, when people are reminded of scenarios covered in training by their colleagues or even the media, they are able to retain or expand on the information they learned."

To be most useful, bias and diversity training cannot be a once-a-year event that checks off the box for corporate compliance.

"Diversity awareness and focus must be a part of a company's culture in all aspects ... For training to be effective, the message must be reinforced regularly and managers must coach their employees when they see behaviors and attitudes that contradict an inclusive environment," said [Shane Green](#), organizational and corporate culture coach and author of *Culture Hacker* (Wiley, 2017).

Instead of planning one-time workshops or an annual day of training, roll out a series of programs, events, celebrations, mentoring opportunities and other experiences for continual learning. Ingrain diversity and inclusion into the fabric of your business so it becomes the norm. This way, it becomes more about reinforcing positive behavior than an annual lecture of all the prohibitive rules.

"The most successful companies don't view workshops as a one-and-done event, but an opportunity to reinforce and build on a larger cultural commitment." said Jonathan Coffin, senior vice president of [VOX Global](#) and co-lead of its diversity and inclusion practice group. "The program matters, but the message and the messenger matters too."

### **3. Customize diversity and inclusion training to your company.**

Diversity and inclusion training should be tailor-made for the organization conducting it.

"Corporate diversity training programs must be based on a foundational understanding of the unique diversity and inclusion objectives and challenges of each organization," said Latham.

To accomplish this, businesses can't take a one-size-fits-all approach to their training program. Each company must take the time to look inward, conduct some fact-gathering initiatives, assess the current company culture, and identify any unresolved conflicts and issues employees face. Surveys, focus groups and other employee audits are some ways to gather information.

Latham recommends bringing in some objective, outside help to guide you through the data collection and analysis.

"Before effective training can be developed and implemented, the company should conduct a thorough self-assessment," he said. "The most useful such assessments are conducted by outside experts who bring fresh perspective, objectivity, and a commitment to identify key diversity and inclusion barriers, without regard to 'sacred cows' or 'but that's the way we have always done it.'"

Once you've done your research, analyzed the data, and developed objectives and goals, you can design a program for the unique needs, history and culture of your company. Your program content should leverage data and examples specific to your organization, said Coffin.

"Part of creating a space of understanding is putting the implications of bias into a context that all of your employees can understand," he said. "For instance, rather than talking about bias or microaggression in the abstract, you can draw on data or excerpts from your own employee survey to use real-life examples that your employees can relate to. If these issues become about their colleagues, about people they care about, the long-term impact will be much stronger."

## 4. Plan an integrated approach.

Bezrukova and her colleagues discovered that employees responded more favorably to diversity training when it used several methods of instruction, including lectures, discussions and exercises. In other words, employers should vary how the training is presented, taking a blended or hybrid approach.

Bezrukova said diversity programs have the greatest impact when they are delivered as part of a series of related initiatives, such as mentoring or networking groups for minority professionals.

"When organizations demonstrate a commitment to diversity, employees are more motivated to learn about and understand these social issues and apply that in their daily interactions," she said.

You can integrate diversity and inclusion training with sessions that discuss [company culture](#), employee satisfaction, retention, career development, etc., said Jeremy Greenberg, founder of [Avenue Group](#). Additionally, it should be infused into company culture in a way that it becomes a part of new employees' [onboarding process](#).

There is a host of traditional ways to reach your intended audience, such as in person, by webinar or over video, as well as more contemporary delivery methods such as [gamification](#) and mobile learning. Regardless of your approach, the goal should always be to engage participants as much as possible.

"Quality, interactive content can help employees better understand the issues," said Pujo. "The sessions should incorporate reality-based scenarios and role-playing (when facilitated in person) so that participants can better understand the concepts being presented. Interactive exercises also help to keep participants engaged during the training."

Another method to deliver diversity and inclusion training is e-learning or micro-learning courses.

"These are shorter courses that can be presented throughout the year and serve as reinforcement to a longer version of training," said Pujo.

## 5. Include workers of all levels.

Training should not only be mandatory for lower-level workers. All employees, regardless of their status in the company, can and should benefit from the sessions.

"All employees must participate, including senior executives," said Greenberg. "Workplace diversity is weakest at the leadership level. Leaders of all races, genders and sexual orientations must participate in any training program for their benefit and to make it clear that the organization is committed."

Even if you're the CEO of your business, you need to participate in the diversity training like everyone else. Not only are you showing others how serious you are about the issue, you are acknowledging that <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com> and everyone can better themselves with training.

"We are all biased in some way, so begin with that understanding and then have people work on what their biases are – some simple, while others more controversial," said Green. "The goal of diversity training is less about agreeing with another person's perspective or orientation [than] about accepting that we are all different, and those differences should not preclude us to minimize that person's abilities, opportunities or being a part of the team."

## **6. Hire an expert.**

To provide quality, professional training for your workers, look to an expert to run the program.

"Assigning a team member, such as the HRO or CFO, to lead the session is tempting, but it is often not the best approach," said Greenberg. "Instead, bring on someone who is independent, has experience leading these specific sessions, serves as an authority figure based on expertise and doesn't bring any institutional 'baggage' because [they are] not an employee."

## **How to become a diversity trainer**

If you are committed to investing in an in-house person to deliver the diversity and inclusion program, make sure the candidate has the knowledge and skill set, as well as the passion and comfort level to deal with the often-complicated dynamics that arise with these issues.

"To become a diversity trainer, an individual should obtain experience in multicultural and diverse programs, become well versed in diversity and inclusion terminology and definitions, and learn about various instructional design and delivery," said Pujo.

You or your potential in-house trainer can also seek out mentorship programs through associations and networking opportunities. To build your toolkit and increase your expertise, you should consider completing professional credential training to earn a diversity certification. There are various diversity professional training programs as well as different designations you can earn, including Certified Diversity Trainer (CDT), Certified Diversity Professional (CDP) and Certified Diversity Executive (CDE).

However, as Latham points out, there are no perfect certifications that qualify a person to offer diversity training. Sometimes, it's about the skills that aren't so easy to measure.

"To be a good diversity trainer, the person must have both a broad and deep knowledge of the diversity issues facing corporations, must have a commitment to address the elephants in the room, and must be a good communicator," said Latham. "In addition, an effective diversity trainer must provide practical advice that the trainees can use to enhance diversity and inclusion in their own workplace."

*Additional reporting by Sammi Caramela and Chad Brooks. Some source interviews were conducted for a previous version of this article.*

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