



How Company Leaders Turn New Diversity Trends into Sustainable Growth

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Are You Caught in the Old Diversity Trap?

A young, white male manager from XYZ Associates (company name changed by request) taps his fingers and wipes his forehead as he prepares to make a critical decision. He must hire a new employee for a technical position and has five candidates to choose from: two candidates of color and three white candidates. The strict job requirements weigh on the manager, but he decides on a candidate, a well qualified white male. The next day, the Human Resources Director interrupts the young manager's lunch and calls him into her office.

"We wanted to talk to you about the person you hired for the technical position," she says, "We value diversity here and you need to explain your decision." The manager, in spite of having turned down two white candidates, is under fire.

Sound familiar? Say the word "diversity" in a room filled with businesspeople and watch their reactions. While some might smile and speak of their strides toward a more inclusive company, a good many will smirk or shift their eyes around the room in avoidance of the subject. Many companies implement initiatives to show concern for the issues of diversity and inclusion, but in their minds they wish they could just down to business. People do not want to deal with the legal ramifications and "rock and a hard place" situations diversity seems to bring.



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www.thunderbirdcollections.com

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The Old Model of Diversity – A Dangerous Place to Stay

Why is the word “diversity” so dangerous? Why the groans from employees who are asked to go through diversity training? The problem is this: too often diversity hovers in an old model that no longer effectively serves organizations and employees. The Human Resources Director at XYZ Associates placed the young manager in a dilemma where neither choosing a less qualified candidate nor perpetuating a lack of diversity in the company was the best answer. Even though the HR Director showed concern about diversity, she had not yet shifted to the new model where fear does not motivate diversity decisions. The face of diversity has changed and not all companies have integrated significant and useful diversity competencies into their core.

How do you know if you are trapped in the old model of diversity? Watch out for the following signs: the word “diversity” relates primarily to race and gender; leaders don’t want to deal with diversity initiatives but feel they have to for legal reasons; company diversity policies consist of little more than documented political correctness; diversity training focuses on protocols and what *not* to say but does not highlight diversity’s true value; a product or service is watered down to meet everyone’s tastes; managers are rewarded with money for recruiting diverse employees; companies hire a Chief Diversity Officer but no real change takes place.

What does remaining in the old model cost an organization? Legal costs and a damaged reputation are the least of a company’s worries. Globalization has raised the skill level required for success and growth ten fold. Leaders can no longer afford to communicate, strategize and problem solve using the same skills they did even five years ago. For example, according to Kieran Ring, CEO of Global Institute of Logistics, sourcing to China used to be a competitive advantage for US firms. Now, most US firms source to China and the advantage lies in “thought leadership and good relationships.” In many cultures, building good relationships takes precedence over quick decision making. Imagine if you managed employees from these cultures; with your leadership, their cultural orientation toward relationship building could be leveraged to increase business in countries like India and China, two rising economic giants. In the old model, diversity equaled being



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How Company Leaders Turn New Diversity Trends into Sustainable Growth

fair. In the new model, diversity equals more and better ideas, a critical part of global development and sustainable growth in the coming decades. In other words, without diversity these days, an organization fast becomes outdated.

Other business costs to an organization in the old model include high turnover, underused resources, undeveloped leadership talent and missed opportunities for new consumer markets. In the global environment, no one type of employee can meet all of the competitive needs of an organization. In addition, diversity's challenges keep interpersonal and business skills sharp, preventing stagnation and status quo, which translate to lost revenue for every industry. Similarly, if companies are to grow and win external customers, they must first create stability by keeping their own house in order. Leaders can no longer afford to foster unhealthy corporate cultures; if those leaders only develop employees who fit the mainstream lifestyle or majority culture, they risk losses due to employee health problems, stress, conflict and alienation. Even worse and infinitely more important, personnel spend their time putting out fires instead of creating proactive plans for their future.

The New Model of Diversity – Getting to Mutual Benefit

How do organizations go out with the old and into the new model of diversity without making the same mistakes? The answer lies in creative solutions that promote the true value of diversity on two levels – business and personal. Take the example of physical exercise, the nemesis of many US Americans today. We know we need to stay healthy but exercise often ends up at the bottom of the priority list. Imagine if exercise had value beyond needing to stay fit. What if instead of saying "I have to exercise" we said "I get to dance" or "I can't wait to go hiking in the mountains". Diversity is no different. If a leader initiates a diversity plan or conducts training because they feel that's "what you have to do", the results will not sustain over time. What if instead leaders and employees alike shared excitement about diversity, including its ongoing difficult challenges? What if diversity felt more like dancing and less like riding a stationary bike? If these questions sound like they were piped in from Disneyland, just wait. Successful companies have already stepped confidently into the new model of diversity and many are ready and willing to share their solutions.

Successful Diversity Solutions in Top Organizations

Organizations must be prepared for the changing face of diversity, and this means sharpening creativity and the ability to handle complexity. As the problems in diverse environments become more complex, so do the solutions. Gender and race no longer exclusively define diversity; though both still play a major role, leaders today broaden their view to new and wide-reaching definitions.

According to Sidhartha Basu, consultant for Deloitte and Touche LLP, diversity is, among other things, about experience and exposure. If you have ten employees from the same culture, race, and gender, they will offer a vast array of experiences, stories and skills. Mr. Basu, a man of Indian origin, commented on the sub-cultures within India as an example. He stated that in the US, all Indians are called "Indian" and viewed as a whole group. The differences between them may not be visible; however, in India the barriers across the twenty eight states can be significant. People from neighboring states may not understand each other unless they speak English. Their experience and exposure range from seeing little outside of their village to living overseas for years.

Mr. Basu's company, Deloitte and Touche LLP, a successful global audit and consulting firm, values the mutual benefit of diversity. The firm not only provides support groups for minorities, parents and others, but also offers assistance in professional development, helping employees from all cultures and walks of life, including majority cultures, rise to the top. These development initiatives illustrate how everyone benefits from diversity in the new model. The organization benefits as well from happier employees who use their strengths and talents to contribute to its growth.

At Turner Broadcasting, Jennifer Dorian, Senior Vice President of Branding and Network Strategy for the Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. entertainment networks TNT and TBS faces a unique diversity situation. As the leader of a department of mostly working mothers, she has had to balance meeting the needs of her employees with promoting fairness in her department. Jennifer's solutions reflect the new model of diversity. Her first task was to understand her employees' situations. As a mother herself, she recognized that raising children equates to a second job; one of the keys to balancing a successful career and children is flexibility. While the nature of her work allowed her to have that flexibility, she decided that if she benefited from flexible work hours then so would her employees – in other words, she would lead by example. Turner Broadcasting company policy permits

How Company Leaders Turn New Diversity Trends into Sustainable Growth

managers and employees to jointly determine flexible schedules where business and work flow demands allow it. She met with each of her subordinates to develop a mutually agreeable work "contract" stating the terms of a flexible schedule. Each party understood their responsibilities and problems were solved cooperatively. As a result, her employees are productive and satisfied with their jobs.

In the new model of diversity, everyone reaps the benefits. All TNT and TBS Branding team members, not just working mothers, benefit from a work schedule which includes the option of working at home one day a week, owing to the unique flexibility of their group's job demands. Once again, true value provides the motivation for diversity. When leadership not only suggests diversity initiatives but also actively participates in and promotes them, the rate of sustainability increases. When an organization conducts a diversity training class, for example, positive leadership participation improves student learning and decreases negative attitudes. Leaders can send an e-mail message to participants explaining the purpose of the class, make an introduction on training day, and attend the class, not to check up on employees but to participate with openness to learning.



Photo source:
www.bigworldmedia.com

How You Can Turn Diversity into Sustainable Growth

What can you do to plant your roots in the new model of diversity? Look to successful, diverse organizations for ideas, and then put your creativity into overdrive. Here are some tips from thriving role models to help you on your way:

- Angela Bostick, Manager of Retail Marketing and Merchandising for the Atlanta Falcons, reminds us to be aware of exclusivity on all levels, including your industry. For example, as an African American you may join a sports organization with primarily African American employees, but you still may be excluded if you do not have prior sports experience. Organizations benefit most by considering and focusing on a wide range of experiences, even those that may not be visible on a resume or job application. Angela also cautions people not to assume that someone from a particular race, gender, sexual orientation or national culture represents their entire group. Diversity encompasses not

How Company Leaders Turn New Diversity Trends into Sustainable Growth

only varied groups but individual thought and personality, which if recognized can contribute significant resources and talent to the organization.

- Executive recruiter Scott L. Walker from SpencerStuart suggests bringing diversity to the heart as well as the head. Diversity metrics reach leaders on the intellectual level but often do not have the impact or the context to inspire real change. Instead, leaders can try placing themselves on a project or a business trip where they experience being a minority. When the situation “hits home” the motivation to come up with solutions increases; they can then share these experiences with employees and encourage them to do the same. Scott also points out that diversity in corporate America exists in silos. In the past, decision makers hesitated to place diverse employees in customer oriented positions such as Sales or Marketing; therefore, much diversity still resides in Human Resources, Finance and the like. While these employees make large contributions, Scott encourages companies to examine where they can expand diversity out of silo functions and into more wide-ranging roles.
- David Hanson, Associate Vice President for Administration and Special Assistant to the Executive Vice President for Finance and Administration at Emory University, asks people to get informed and educated about diverse groups. Much of the conflict and negativity that arises in diverse organizations comes from incorrect information. For example, as an openly gay professional, he challenges others not to make assumptions about other openly gay colleagues that could lead to an offense or other challenges, but rather to politely ask direct questions. He also recommends that diversity be approached in an organization from the inside out; in other words, if an organization defines diversity as a core value, related procedures and processes radiate out from that core. For example, Emory University has a defined and clear structure in place to ensure that diverse viewpoints and voices are heard by leadership during decision making. Once again, all employees mutually benefit from this creative initiative.
- Jennifer Dorian, Senior Vice President of Branding and Network Strategy for TBS and TNR holds norm setting meetings in which all employees present have a voice. Within guidelines set by Turner Broadcasting’s overall company policies and procedures, the group discusses and agrees on norms that will guide day to day life at the organization from celebrating birthdays to vacation issues. In a diverse group, everyone has a chance to challenge what they believe is “normal” and come up with creative solutions and agreements.
- Sherwin Krug, Chief Operating Officer at MFG.com, has implemented a unique and successful initiative to promote global awareness at his growing, international

How Company Leaders Turn New Diversity Trends into Sustainable Growth

organization. Any employee willing to take their vacation outside of the US receives \$500 towards their trip, \$250 for their spouse and an extra day of vacation time. While encouraging diverse thinking at the company, Sherwin offers a solution where everyone wins.

Taking the Next Step to Success

Today, signs of creative diversity emerge from organizations of all types. These signs appear in different forms from the appointment of a new CEO of Pepsi Co., an Indian woman named Indra K. Nooyi, to Georgia Power's support for local disadvantaged high school students. Although differences may be present in an organization, they may not be leveraged to their fullest potential. A new model for leveraging differences offers limitless possibilities and priceless benefits, and the resulting increased profits never hurt anyone.

Even the challenges diversity poses result in gain for employees. In our example above, the young manager from XYZ Associates hired a white candidate because he felt that candidate was best qualified for the job. In the old model of diversity the manager would feel trapped by what he perceives as diversity quotas; he might even decide under pressure to reverse his choice and hire a less qualified candidate. In the new model, the manager would stick by his decision, the rationale being that he considered what was best for the organization, not one particular individual. Then he would think about how he could increase diversity in other areas of the company and where colleagues might be receptive to change. He would devise proactive diversity initiatives that he could put in place in his own department and implement mutually beneficial solutions. In other words, he can choose the best candidate for the job and still promote diversity within the organization through promoting its value.



Photo source: www.indiana.edu

Whatever your organization's approach to diversity, examine that approach with care to ensure it is not oversimplified or designed from the "because I have to" point of view. While this may solve short term issues, successful organizations know that forward thinking, sustainable ideas hold the key to continued growth. Enjoy your diverse employees, learn about their families, where they came from, how they problem solve and what experiences they bring to the table. Use the conflicts and struggles to advance your career skills and

How Company Leaders Turn New Diversity Trends into Sustainable Growth

personal growth. Take advantage of complex situations – they push you to the next level. Stretch your creativity and innovate inclusive solutions that benefit both the organization and those who drive it. When this enjoyment becomes part of your corporate culture, you'll put on your dancing shoes and forget you are exercising at all.

About the Author:

Vicki Flier, principal trainer and founder of Highroad Presentations, provides real-world training programs in intercultural communication, multicultural team building and international business skills to corporations and educators. Previously, in her home of Atlanta, Georgia, Vicki supervised and conducted training for international and domestic Distribution and Manufacturing for Immucor, Inc., a worldwide blood bank automation company with affiliates throughout Europe. In the past, Vicki has lived in Nepal and worked in China, Germany, India and Thailand. She has traveled in several countries including Austria, Belgium, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, England, Greece, Israel, Jordan, Mexico and Panama. Her clients include The Home Depot, The Carter Center, Prudential Financial, Merial Inc., Eaton Corporation, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Georgia Board of Regents, Emory School of Medicine, Maxxis International, Foundation Technology Services and Scientific Atlanta. Vicki is an expert public presenter and speaks regularly for international organizations around Atlanta. Her topics of address have included doing business in India, successful public speaking, cross-cultural effectiveness in the workplace, business communication, training across cultures, software regulation issues and more. She has coached executives on presentation skills and improving diplomacy, and helps clients speak more successfully to international audiences.



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