



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Diversity and its Nuances

Diversity at its best...

Learning points

- The challenges in managing workplace diversity
- Role of CEOs in workplace diversity
- Methods to augment diversity efforts

Workplace diversity has come a long way from being a mere goodwill measure. Today it is a business imperative. However, despite being a top business issue it poses certain inherent challenges. One such challenge is to have an even representation of diversity in the top slot.

CEOs and their contemporaries have more than a few things in common. Race is one of them. Hispanics pull up Hispanics, Asians pull up Asians and Americans pull up Americans. This trend is visible in most hierarchical structures. Leaders intentionally or unintentionally have been known to demonstrate preference for their kind of people. This, experts consider a major cause of concern. At KeySpan for instance, Bracey Lewis, a job aspirant, made a remarkable statement about diversity. That one statement changed the company's whole perspective about workforce diversity!

According to Bracey, one of the most important criteria while short listing her prospective employers is the composition of the senior management in terms of gender, race and culture mix. Bracey underscored the importance of having a diverse senior management profile. She further emphasized that diversity in the higher echelons of corporate hierarchy reassures employees of the organization's commitment to it.

Bracey is not alone in this. Many employees are increasingly seeking companies that have a top-down approach to diversity. There is little denial that the tone for every strategic move is set at the top. Efforts can just fizzle out if the CEOs and their contemporaries show laxity. Unlike other business agendas that require only the CEO's endorsement, diversity calls for total CEO involvement. CEOs have to push the diversity drive at every level. For instance, Edmund Carpenter, CEO Barnes Group, successfully managed to push his diversity agenda through every recruitment drive. Thanks to his involvement, today Barnes is a healthy mix of women and minority employees in not only its workforce but also its top rungs.

A lot of corporations flaunt their "Chief Diversity Officer" as a proof of their commitment to diversity. However, merely assigning the role and position to a person is not enough to tackle a sensitive issue like diversity. The momentum that the senior officials of a company provide through their involvement is unparalleled. CEO involvement gets the entire issue of workplace diversity on the scorecard. The message that the management is vigilant keeps them on guard. If they don't do it they are doomed.



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Despite, the emphasis on diversity there are few role models that employees see at the top. This is indicative of the fact that corporations have a long way to go before they can reap the benefits of diversity.

Miles to go

To attain the diversity objectives, corporations should analyze the factors that constitute a complete diversity solution. Having a variegated senior management is just one of the components of a complete diversity package. The other components include overcoming cultural mindsets, gender bias, resistance to change and corporate tradition. Practices like “image hiring” and gender bias are common and people begin to experience these discriminatory practices at the very onset of their careers. Thus hitting at their root cause is a challenge that corporations have to brace for.

Globalization too contributes its share of challenges to the diversity agenda. For instance, in Middle East countries, businesses are male-dominated. Arabs for instance are very clear about their gender preferences. Hence, hiring for the Middle East is gender specific. However, all organizations may not take the practice in right spirit and they may have to pay a heavy price for their hiring decisions. Another diversity-related dilemma stems from issues of homosexual marriages. Society and the corporate fraternity are yet to resolve these issues. Lesson to corporations who must master the act of walking the tight rope!

According to Redia Anderson, Chief Diversity Officer, Deloitte & Touche, apart from the cultural and gender barriers, diversity has another face. Diversity means different things to different people. Individual interpretations of diversity rarely come out in boardroom discussions, since everyone refers to his idea of a variegated workforce as “diversity”. Labeling different thoughts with a common tab does not unite people in action. Hence, when people talk about diversity, it’s important to understand their perspectives.

Further workplace diversity is also a function of customer base. Having a workforce that matches customer composition is a strategic business imperative that provides corporations a definite competitive advantage.

Rewarding diversity

In view of the impending diversity-related challenges corporations need to devise strategies that serve the very purpose of diversity initiatives. Rewarding diversity and tying it to employee appraisals is one such approach. For instance, at KeySpan, every employee irrespective of his position in the corporate hierarchy has to contribute to diversity hiring, be it through employee referrals or other forms of recommendation. Similarly, Day & Zimmerman’s employs intensive training, mentoring and staffing policies that ensure workplace diversity. The company spends a huge amount of its funds on training minorities and women employees. It also promptly rewards employees that contribute in filling up job positions with minority candidates.

The distinguisher...



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A corporation's success or failure depends on the clarity in thought and vision it musters over its diversity agenda.