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The More The Merrier

Long, long ago...

A chemical company decided to go the "*quality*" way to boost its competitive position. New mission statements were drafted, work processes redesigned and employees reorganized into teams that would function around natural work processes.

For instance, a team of employees was formed to monitor the sulphuric-acid manufacturing process. In the past, as is typical of most factory environments, the company held an employee responsible for only three kettles out of a process that involved seventeen different manufacturing kettles. As a result, most employees suffered from the "*It's not my job*" syndrome. An employee did not care much about the end result as long as his manufacturing kettles were taken care of. This attitude was affecting overall performance results.

Failed attempt

The company decided to cross-train employees to help them understand the entire sulphuric-acid manufacturing process. The management believed that such training could motivate employees to stake ownership claims and suggest ways for process improvement. However, none of this happened! The management soon discovered that the diversity that makes teams successful could also bring about their downfall.

Organizations can become better and stronger from the cross-pollination of values, ideas and perspectives of a diverse workforce. However, this synergy does not happen automatically. In fact, as most organizations now know, integrating diverse perspectives, values and functions is an uphill task.

In defense

Diversity training is the right solution to building positive synergy amongst a diverse workforce.

It improves the effectiveness of work teams. Yet, its importance remains understated.

The first of the lot

Active diversity management is not merely about training managers to reorganize teams cleverly and deliberately to achieve perfectly mixed groups. It is also about getting them to understand the realities of diversity and training them to identify and tap the opportunities that lie within their work teams.

Diverse work teams can be far more dysfunctional than homogeneous teams. Therefore, it is equally important for managers to understand diversity issues that most work teams encounter. These issues go beyond the obvious physical differences and include issues such as differences in communication styles, functional expertise, problem-solving, management level, training and education, professional experiences and work ethics.



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When managers fail to recognize these differences for what they are, they are likely to make unfair stereotypical judgments.

Additional element

As part of active diversity management, a team coming together for the first time must be taken through an introduction to diversity. A bank holding company conducts a three-day course where employees are taught to be aware of diversity issues and given the skills to effectively cope with differences.

In focus

Diversity management is not a standalone event. IBM rightly defines diversity management. It considers it as an initiative that creates an environment where every employee can excel and contribute to the organization's objectives.

IBM sponsored a leadership-development program for cross-functional teams. The three-day training session helped them focus on real world business issues. While helping team members acquire teaming and leadership skills, the session also stressed on learning about organizational and cultural changes.

Trainers believe that by working on real-life business issues, team members focus on working together to find potential solutions. These workshops helped the company discover that undeterred focus is imperative to overcome diversity barriers.

When team members have a clear objective they tend to capitalize on the benefits of diverse perspectives and ideas rather than dwell over the negative aspects of diversity.

Know it all

Awareness training is another critical element of diversity training. It legitimizes the fact that each person views a problem or an issue differently. Therefore, dealing with diversity would require that an employee accept and understand these differences rather than degenerate into a name-calling, untrusting person.

Experts believe that equipping employees with tools and opportunities that help them understand one another teaches them to value and appreciate one another. This gets diverse individuals to work together more effectively. During such awareness workshops teams are trained to include and consider everybody's' ideas and viewpoints.

At IBM

The biggest 'diversity' challenge is to get team members to view their colleagues as equals. To overcome this hurdle experts suggest organizations reassess their cultures to identify specific diversity issues. When IBM conducted a '*culture*' assessment it discovered that the organization recruited and rewarded independent and individual performers. This showed that the IBM culture supported individualism- a big obstacle in teaming diverse work groups.

As part of its awareness training IBM conducts a series of activities that help an organization achieve its '*diversity*' objectives. One of these activities involves getting



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employees to develop a list of norms and behaviors that are expected of individuals working in diverse teams.

For instance if a norm states, "We value the ideas of individuals of all levels, races and genders" then the supporting behavior is stated as, "Listen to different points of view before making the final judgment." Another activity involves a forced rotation of team responsibilities.

IBM and most quality-driven organizations realize that to be successful they must maximize the contributions of every member of their diverse work forces. This can only happen when the organization values employees of all genders, levels, backgrounds and cultures. It is time others too followed suit.