

# YES, Diversity Matters

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Many organizations have recognized that the diversity training they've done over the past couple of decades has often not yielded significant results or an adequate return on their investment. In some cases, diversity training elicited resistance and animosity that seemed to make the situation worse. In many organizations, the diversity training was very well received, but like many other training programs, there was insufficient follow-up, and it was back to "business as usual" within 6-12 months. Still other companies have never been convinced of the business case for diversity and have not identified the bottom line benefits for proactively addressing diversity within their own organization.

## The Challenge

To overcome this situation or perhaps, in some cases, address diversity for the first time, we need to help employees understand why diversity matters and prompt their interest in actively pursuing additional learning about diversity and inclusion.

The reality for many organizations is that they are operating with such a lean staff that it is nearly impossible for anyone to take more than a few hours away from their job for training. In today's workplace, a full or multiple day training program is becoming a rarity.

## The Solution

Several clients recently provided the opportunity to try some new approaches to diversity training. They were planning internal conferences,

and wanted a variety of short workshops on different diversity-related topics. They wanted the training to be interactive and engaging, and of course, they wanted the sessions to create some meaningful learning and to be received positively.

The need for delivering effective and meaningful training in shorter "sound bites" is something that we've been hearing for the last couple of years. Our question was, "Is it possible to create experiential learning that can be delivered in a two (2) hour course that has sufficient impact to leave participants wanting more because they had such a positive experience?" The answer, we found, is YES!

We decided that the session we were going to design needed to be fun and engaging, something very different from what people sometimes expect when they hear they are going to attend a diversity session. We wanted the training to be "inclusive" of the wide range of differences so that it was obvious to everyone who attended that learning more about diversity was in all of their self interest. We also wanted to create an experience that proved to the participants, first hand, that diversity adds value when effectively utilized.

We decided to utilize one dimension of difference, and then debrief the experiential learning to all dimensions of difference, so that participants walked away from the session focusing on the benefits of diversity, in general, rather than just a greater appreciation of one difference. We chose to focus on gender differences, since everyone is either male or female, and could relate their own life experiences to the training content.

## The Results

Approximately 200 participants, including those in senior level leadership positions (one organization was a corporation, the other a branch of the military) participated in this two hour course.

The results of the sessions were dramatic. The performance difference, or outcomes, between diverse and non-diverse groups was notable, with diverse groups outperforming their counterparts. Also notable was the depth of the feelings and empathy generated among participants. The most important lessons learned were:

1. Diverse teams who utilize their differences can clearly address tasks more effectively than non-diverse groups. One point to note is that diversity alone is not sufficient; utilizing and leveraging the individual differences in skill, style, etc. is the key to increased performance.
2. Individuals who do not feel valued tend to feel isolated, disengaged and less willing to contribute. In one session, half of the individuals in one sub-group were clearly disengaged. Their dissatisfaction with the experiential activity was obvious and disconcerting. When we noted this observation in the debrief discussion, what we learned was that their behavior was a reaction to being "excluded" by their team mates. This created a huge "ah-ha" moment for everyone, including the facilitator! How often does this happen in real life where we only see the reaction to being excluded and not what created this behavior? Having the opportunity to share what they had experienced on their team caused them to become re-engaged. Had the facilitator not taken the risk to point out her observation, they

would not have opened up about their experience, and would have left the session feeling very negative about the experience.

3. Individuals in homogeneous groups tend to have the same strengths and, because they over-focus in these areas, they neglect other critical functions, such as completing a task on time. As a result, they generally underperformed their diverse counterparts. The lesson here spoke directly to the benefits of diversity, i.e., that any strength used in excess becomes a weakness.

## The Benefits

The greatest benefit was the fact that the goals for the sessions were achieved: increasing diversity understanding and creating an appreciation for diversity. However, four more specific benefits were realized from these sessions:

1. Participants left with no doubt about the fact that diversity matters, and an understanding of the underlying reasons why diversity improves bottom line results.
2. Perhaps just as valuable as the understanding of diversity was the huge interest and enthusiasm created in further diversity learning. In both organizations, the majority of participants expressed a desire for the course to be longer than it was!
3. The exercises enabled some individuals to feel 'in the minority' which created notable empathy. One participant remarked "To know that I had the solution at hand, but not be allowed to contribute, was the worst feeling I've ever had."
4. The activity stimulated participants' creativity, opening up a rich

environment for brainstorming,  
especially around how diversity  
creates value.

We know how important diversity is to organizations and how inevitable it is, given the changing make-up of our society and workforce. It is, therefore, very gratifying to create a fun, compact and highly engaging learning session which significantly motivates interest and action in acquiring further diversity knowledge, understanding and appreciation for differences.

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