

## COVER

*Large-scale change. One individual at a time.*

A guide to diversity as a change management process.

## INSIDE FRONT COVER

Diversity is about the way we see.

As small children, we know no boundaries. We see through eyes that require no corrective lenses. And because we see before we speak, our minds know no labels. Once we begin to speak, however, we acquire the language of differences and our minds begin to associate what we see with descriptive, and sometimes pejorative, words and phrases.

And so we begin to lose our natural acceptance for what is before our eyes.

We learn labels like “black and white” and “right and wrong” and “perfect and flawed.” We label the world around us so that it makes sense, so that it has order. Our vision becomes blurred. And often, without conscious thought or intent, many of us lose the unencumbered acceptance we had as children. We become “comfortable” around people who think, act, and look like we do

And therein lies the problem facing most organizations: how to help employees see objectively again – without bias or prejudice – and promote a culture that values differences.

A new workforce is emerging and, as it does, it is challenging many of our preconceptions and standardized ways of thinking and acting. Many of us find it difficult to see past our old ways of thinking and focus on the opportunities this evolution presents.

Diversity efforts address this difficulty and involve correcting the collective flawed vision of an organization by adjusting the cultural glasses through which it views the world. Diversity is about acceptance – about promoting and leveraging the differences that are integral to all people. Diversity is about promoting the belief that everyone is different and that’s the way it is supposed to be.

When an organization successfully promotes this belief, then it has truly begun to *manage diversity*

## Diversity and the High-Performance Organization

Diversity initiatives have gone beyond being merely the “right” or “nice” thing to do. The truth of the matter is that effectively managing diversity is the only way an organization will remain competitive in the dawning millennium. Yet, barriers to diversity efforts exist in the place where it is the most difficult to effect real change – the hearts and minds of the individuals who collectively create the pervasive culture of an organization. Past efforts to break down these barriers have ranged from affirmative action to valuing differences. But now--more than at any time in the past – diversity efforts must reach a new plateau. Previous attempts to speak “at” or “to” collective prejudice must be replaced by real change management efforts that aim to effect large-scale change by altering individual behavior.

The word “diversity” seems to be everywhere lately – newspapers, magazines, television. Not a new concept, so why has diversity suddenly become so important? For the simple reason that companies can no longer either sidestep diversity – via the timeworn practice of creating rigid hierarchies and homogeneous work units – or micromanage it, by handling conflicts among people on an ad hoc and piecemeal basis.

The world won’t let them.

Trite, though no less true, the “global village” really is upon us, not only in the way companies organize and operate, but also in how they market and sell. Increasingly, companies have sites in far-flung parts of the globe. They must manage people from vastly different cultures and find and retain an internationally mobile managerial group that is as at ease in Sri Lanka as in St. Louis. At the same time, they’re creating or refining products and services to appeal to different tastes and sensibilities. Doing that effectively demands equivalent diversity in the work environment.

You don’t need to operate globally, however, to achieve competitive advantage from effective diversity management. In fact, culture clashes can arise between generations or locations or functions within an organization as easily as they can between ethnic groups. In the world we live in today, differences have become a positive force on virtually all fronts. In recruiting and retention. In innovative marketing and selling. In competitive advantage. In sustainable profitable growth.

It’s that simple ... and that complex.

Most organizations are victimized by habit. It may not be intentional, but a conspiracy of convenience keeps them from establishing and reaping the enormous benefits of an increasingly diverse workforce. This habit is grounded in an often subconscious and unacknowledged comfort with the familiar. It ignores, denies, suppresses, and eliminates diversity, severely limiting immense potential for creativity and richness. While leadership may fully embrace the power of diversity and espouse it throughout the organization, the deeply rooted conspiracy of convenience resists, silently, but effectively. Tradition, preference, and comfort prevail.

It’s no secret that like attracts like. People who are alike generally share the same ideology, skills and perceptions and that’s not always a good thing. It’s the proliferation of sameness that leads to stale organization culture and, ultimately, extinction. The inability to see beyond one’s own experience can prevent recruiting, hiring and developing the diverse workforce needed to appeal to growing market segments.

Imagine, for instance, putting a group of aging baby boomers in charge of developing programmatic ad sales strategy? Or having a group of middle-aged white men determine how to sell effectively to women in Latino cultures?

Consequently, organizations have been forced to deal with diversity issues as they relate to an almost universal business goal – satisfying the customer. You see, organizations that employ a diverse population

consistently introduce successful products and services. Perhaps it is because they appeal to a wider audience. Perhaps it is because diverse work teams generate innovative ideas. Remember that in business situations (as in real-life ones), it is the people who are the least alike who challenge each other the most, and it is from this challenge and the resulting tensions it creates, that great ideas emerge. Time and again, diverse work teams have been proven highly effective, and in today's competitive landscape, not only are they effective, but essential.

Clearly, hiring and developing diverse employees for significant roles in sales, customer service, new product development, public and community relations will be critical. But that's only the beginning. Tapping the skills and creativity of diverse employees can have a positive impact on virtually every area of operations. In organizations focused on high performance that's already starting to happen through greater reliance on task forces as the organizing determinant. The reasoning is that, when they come together, teams embodying a cross-section of views, skills, experience, attitudes and perspectives will produce more than the sum of their parts.

But you can't have this type of effective teamwork if individuals cling to prejudice and fear. Knocking down the barriers that impede diversity efforts is challenging. Yet, organizations that are not addressing dramatically increased diversity in the workforce and the marketplace soon will be. Managing diversity requires aspiring to a new plateau by forcing a shift in the collective viewpoint. It requires that *individuals* no longer view diversity as simply what separates them from each other but also as the impetus for what can ultimately bring them together in a charged way.

It's simple. Diversity is no longer a choice. It's a priority.

Organizations building diverse teams will, simply, have a competitive advantage. For them, diversity is very good news. No longer is the question "Is diversity a factor?" but rather "what role will diversity play in creating the high-performance organization?"

### **Managing Diversity Is Really About Managing Change**

Clearly, real change is upon us.

The intensity of the challenges in managing across cultures is about to take a colossal leap forward as organizations move from a multinational to a global strategy. The demographic changes in the marketplace and workforce will only become more dramatic soon. Managing this change and achieving strategic advantage depends on making a conscious decision to adapt organizational culture and behavior to engage an increasingly diverse employee base. This is the human resource challenge that will puzzle most organizations in the coming decade.

Yet how can organizations really change the often-subconscious bias, intolerance, and exclusive attitudes that limit their success? Can managers become more aware of the unique talents everyone brings to the table? Can ingrained behavior be altered in a significant way? Is it possible for people to change?

We believe so. We believe that it happens on an individual basis – one person at a time confronting fears, realizing new potential and embracing a new level of commitment. The success of a diversity effort hinges on organization culture. Broad-based culture change will only work if it happens in the minds and hearts of the individuals who must "buy-in" to it.

That's why we prefer to address diversity as part of a broader change initiative because, in our experience, developing and sustaining an environment that actively leverages differences goes beyond mere efforts towards retraining ineffective or inappropriate behavior.

Further, we resoundingly believe in the plausibility of both individual and organizational transformation — we've witnessed it — and we understand that no less will be required to create lasting change.

