Guide to diversity strategies that work

By Devan Moonsamy   2 Oct 2018

Despite the challenges that come with managing and getting the best out of and for diverse teams, ways to handle diversity successfully have been identified, tested and shown to work. Specific skills and knowledge are required, but they are usually not what one would expect.

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Too often, if employees are trained on diversity, the focus is on their peers' culture, and even mundane things like what type of foods certain groups might prefer. This may have some value, but in a very limited sense. Even teaching staff to greet one another in their home language may help, but again, it will not remove or even begin to address those deep-seated prejudices preventing us from really making progress.

Much more in-depth and focused interventions are required to get people to understand, acknowledge, and embrace the true value of diversity. After this initial process of improving interpersonal relationships begins, employees can then be guided in the creation of a conducive workplace environment for the advantages of diversity to be realised.

One major advantage of maintaining a sound diversity structure in the workplace is that it ensures we draw all types of customers to our business. There are many other advantages, all of which can be taught along with the means to implement them.

To begin teaching the necessary skills, we need to start on the individual level, introducing powerful tools for the employee

to use in interrogating their own views and getting to the heart of their own prejudices, fears and worries. Once these have been acknowledged in the safe and carefully facilitated training space, work begins on implementing interpersonal diversity strategies that are effective in the South African environment.

A diversity expert should tailor diversity strategies for the target group and seek to address the specific problems that are cropping up and preventing the company or team from performing optimally. There are a number of ways that have proved to work, but again, they are not the traditional methods one expects, and they require a skilled facilitator or trainer to implement.

Diversity task force

One effective way of managing diversity and maximising its value is to form task forces or project teams to address obstacles related to diversity and also to find ways to increase equitable representation in the company. This method has been tested and implemented with great success in companies such as IBM and Deloitte. IBM, in particular, has used this method for decades with wonderful results for employee diversity.

In the training space, employees and managers are taught how to form and operate these teams through team-building exercises. A diversity task force can be formed from those present at a training session, and trainees can begin with some of the planning involved under the guidance of the facilitator.

Corporate diversity task forces can be trained to promote social accountability, to address recruitment issues, and to monitor the progress of women, black people, those with disabilities and other groups that are often side-lined to ensure they are well treated and retained, among many other diversity-related interventions.

Transparency

As an example of what team-building and task forces can do, Deloitte, through these same interventions, found that transparency in decision-making is a key way to get positive results for diversity goals. Without first building a cohesive team and setting them to work on diversity challenges, Deloitte would not have discovered how important this factor is to its over 250,000 employees. The value of transparency has thus emerged as a critical input for diversity success.

IBM also launched hugely successful diversity task forces in the 1990s. They were so effective that these task forces are a pillar of the company's HR strategy to this day. Some advantages for IBM included that the number of female executives worldwide increased by 370%; ethnic minorities by 233%; LGBT executives rose by 733%; and those with disabilities more than tripled (David Thomas, HBR).

We can thus see the incredible value that team-building and dedicated task teams can achieve. It is these types of diversity initiatives which have kept progressive companies such as IBM and Deloitte going strong through the decades.

If you want the same for your business and your team, train them for the success they deserve. Diversity is a wonderful resource which, if nurtured through training and team-building, will bring excellent returns for you the individual, for communities and companies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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