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Creating a Diversity and Inclusion Training Program

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Diversity and inclusion training can improve equality in your workplace. Here's how to create a program to do just that.

- Creating diversity and inclusion training programs is a great way to address biases and prejudices within a workplace.
- The best way to ensure that diversity training is successful is to tailor it to your company and needs.
- If you are interested in becoming a diversity trainer, there are several certification and mentorship programs available.

- This article is for business owners who want to learn more about diversity and inclusion programs and how to ensure they are successful.

Though businesses of all sizes have made significant strides in becoming more inclusive and diverse over the past few decades, it's still a struggle for many to overcome the biases that limit how some employees see those who are different from them.

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One way to create more welcoming workplaces that respect differences and give a voice to people who are often underrepresented is to implement company diversity and inclusion training programs.

Diversity and inclusion training has the potential to positively address biases and prejudice within organizations, according to Katerina Bezrukova, co-author of a study that examined 40 years of research on diversity training and an associate professor at the University at Buffalo's School of Management.

These benefits can lead to some real financial gains for companies as well, according to research by McKinsey & Co. The study found that organizations with diverse workforces are 35% more likely to have above-average profit margins than companies with more homogenous employee bases.

"A well-designed [diversity and inclusion] training program can elevate employee morale, boost customer satisfaction and drive bottom-line business success," said Pamela Pujo, a diversity thought leader at Affirmity who also serves on the Greater Dallas Advisory Board to the Texas Diversity Council. A diversity and inclusion training program "will encourage increased collaboration, enhance interpersonal skills and empower underrepresented groups to feel more valued and respected in the workplace," she said.

However, to arrive at these successful outcomes, you must carry out the training responsibly.

"At best, it can engage and retain women and people of color in the workplace, but at worst, it can backfire and reinforce stereotypes," Bezrukova said in a statement.

"Sometimes, [diversity and inclusion] training reinforces differences between people rather than providing the needed insight and instruction on how to work effectively together," Pujo added.

Key takeaway: Diversity and inclusion training can help address biases and prejudice, as well as lead to financial gains for businesses.

How to make your diversity training successful

To avoid some of these pitfalls, consider the following tips for getting the most out of your diversity training:

1. Develop an understanding of diversity and inclusion training.

Establishing a diversity and inclusion training program for your organization starts with developing a clear, detailed definition of what the program should entail. A comprehensive diversity and inclusion training program provides concrete ways to engage in respectful and positive interactions in the workplace while reducing discrimination and prejudice based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, age, religion, physical and mental ability, and socioeconomic status.

Diversity and inclusion training programs should target all employees and address a range of issues, including unconscious bias, microaggressions and cross-cultural communications. Effective training moves beyond simply encouraging employees to tolerate differences to teaching employees how to work well together while embracing diverse perspectives.

Diversity and inclusion training programs "should tie diversity and inclusion to the vision, mission, values and goals of the organization, and then move into how to value all aspects of diversity with co-workers, clients, customers and the community at large," said Stan Kimer, president of [Total Engagement Consulting by Kimer](#).

"Appropriate and effective diversity and inclusion training can mitigate legal risks and bolster affirmative defenses, support ongoing recruitment and retention efforts, and contribute to a more productive workplace," added Weldon Latham, a principal with [Jackson Lewis](#) and chairman of the firm's corporate diversity counseling practice group.

2. Extend and maintain diversity and inclusion training over time.

For diversity training to be as successful as possible, it needs to be delivered over an extended period of time. In Bezrukova's study, diversity training had positive effects on employees' knowledge, attitudes and behaviors toward diverse groups, but over time, their attitudes regressed to what they were before the training.

"The attitudes this training attempts to change are generally strong, emotion-driven and tied to our personal identities, and we found little evidence that long-term effects to them are sustainable," Bezrukova said. "However, when people are reminded of scenarios covered in training by their colleagues or even the media, they are able to retain or expand on the information they learned."

To be most useful, bias-and-diversity training cannot be a once-a-year event that checks off the box for corporate compliance.

"Diversity awareness and focus must be a part of a company's culture in all aspects … For training to be effective, the message must be reinforced regularly, and managers must coach their employees when they see behaviors and attitudes that contradict an inclusive environment," said Shane Green, an organizational and corporate culture coach and author of *Culture Hacker* (Wiley, 2017).

Instead of planning one-time workshops or an annual day of training, roll out a series of programs, events, celebrations, mentoring opportunities and other experiences for continual learning. Ingrain diversity and inclusion into the fabric of your business so it becomes the norm. This way, it becomes more about reinforcement of positive behavior than an annual lecture of all of the prohibitive rules.

"The most successful companies don't view workshops as a one-and-done event but an opportunity to reinforce and build on a larger cultural commitment," said Jonathan Coffin, senior vice president of VOX Global and co-lead of its diversity and inclusion practice group. "The program matters, but the message and the messenger matter, too."

3. Tailor diversity and inclusion training to your company.

Diversity and inclusion training should be tailor-made for the organization conducting it.

"Corporate diversity training programs must be based on a foundational understanding of the unique diversity and inclusion objectives and challenges of each organization," Latham said.

To accomplish this, businesses can't take a one-size-fits-all approach to their training program. Each company must take the time to look inward, conduct some fact-gathering initiatives, assess the current company culture, and identify any unresolved conflicts and issues employees face. Surveys, focus groups and other employee audits are some ways to gather information.

Latham recommended bringing in some objective outside help to guide you through the data collection and analysis.

"Before effective training can be developed and implemented, the company should conduct a thorough self-assessment," he said. "The most useful such assessments are conducted by outside experts who bring fresh perspective, objectivity and a commitment to identify key diversity and inclusion barriers, without regard to 'sacred cows' or 'but that's the way we have always done it.'"

Once you've done your research, analyzed the data, and developed objectives and goals, you can design a program for the unique needs, history and culture of your company. Your program content should leverage data and examples specific to your organization, Coffin said.

"Part of creating a space of understanding is putting the implications of bias into a context that all of your employees can understand," he said. "For instance, rather than talking about bias or microaggression in the abstract, you can draw on data or excerpts from your own employee survey to

use real-life examples that your employees can relate to. If these issues become about their colleagues, about people they care about, the long-term impact will be much stronger."

4. Plan an integrated approach.

Bezrukova and her colleagues discovered that employees responded more favorably to diversity training when it used several methods of instruction, including lectures, discussions and exercises. In other words, employers should vary how they present the training, taking a blended or hybrid approach.

Bezrukova said diversity programs have the greatest impact when they are delivered as part of a series of related initiatives, such as mentoring or networking groups for minority professionals.

"When organizations demonstrate a commitment to diversity, employees are more motivated to learn about and understand these social issues and apply that in their daily interactions," she said.

You can integrate diversity and inclusion training with sessions that discuss company culture, employee satisfaction and retention, or career development, said Jeremy Greenberg, founder of Avenue Group. Additionally, this training should be infused into the company culture in a way that it becomes a part of new employees' onboarding process.

There are many traditional ways to reach your intended audience – such as in person, by webinar or over video – as well as more contemporary delivery methods, such as [gamification](#) and mobile learning. Regardless of your approach, the goal should always be to engage participants as much as possible.

"Quality, interactive content can help employees better understand the issues," Pujo said. "The sessions should incorporate reality-based scenarios and role-playing (when facilitated in person) so that participants can better understand the concepts being presented. Interactive exercises also help to keep participants engaged during the training."

Another method for delivering diversity and inclusion training is e-learning or micro-learning courses.

"These are shorter courses that can be presented throughout the year and serve as reinforcement to a longer version of training," Pujo said.

5. Include workers of all levels.

Training should not be mandatory only for lower-level workers. All employees, regardless of their status in the company, can and should benefit from the sessions.

"All employees must participate, including senior executives," Greenberg said. "Workplace diversity is weakest at the leadership level. Leaders of all races, genders and sexual orientations must participate

in any training program for their benefit and to make it clear that the organization is committed."

Even if you're the CEO of your business, you need to participate in the diversity training like everyone else. By doing so, you not only show others how serious you are about the issue but also acknowledge that everyone can better themselves with training.

"We are all biased in some way, so begin with that understanding, and then have people work on what their biases are – some simple, while others more controversial," Green said. "The goal of diversity training is less about agreeing with another person's perspective or orientation [than] about accepting that we are all different, and those differences should not preclude us to minimize that person's abilities, opportunities or being a part of the team."

6. Hire an expert.

To provide quality, professional training for your workers, look to an expert to run the program.

"Assigning a team member, such as the HRO or CFO, to lead the session is tempting, but it is often not the best approach," Greenberg said. "Instead, bring on someone who is independent, has experience leading these specific sessions, serves as an authority figure based on expertise and doesn't bring any institutional 'baggage' because [they are] not an employee."

Key takeaway: To help ensure that your diversity training is successful, you should customize it to your company, have an integrated approach and continue your training over a long period.

Does diversity training really work?

While diversity training has been touted as a strong solution to many race- and diversity-related issues in the workplace, there is some speculation as to whether diversity training actually works as intended. Most companies with diversity training programs have not officially measured their efficacy, and there is evidence that diversity training can backfire by putting people on the defensive. Here are some reasons a diversity training program might fail:

- There is an expectation that participants will shed their biases – which is often not possible or realistic.
- Companies use negative messaging, like implied threats, or negative consequences, such as legal action against the company.
- Making the trainings mandatory can instill animosity and resentment.
- Trainings are used as remedial actions or as punishments for failing to meet expectations.

To investigate the effectiveness of diversity training, writers at the Harvard Business Review conducted their own study, in which they created a diversity training program and tested the results. Here are some of their findings:

1. The training positively affected employees who were unsupportive of women in the workplace by making them more likely to acknowledge discrimination against women, show support for policies designed to help women and acknowledge their own biases.
2. There was no backlash from employees who were already supportive of women.
3. Diversity training has little effect on the behavior of men or white employees in general.
4. The training prompted women to be more proactive about their own advancement by seeking out mentorships.
5. Employees who participated in the training were more likely to acknowledge their own racial biases and recognize the work of their peers who were racial minorities.

The results of the study suggest that there is no one-size-fits-all diversity training and that it takes a lot of careful thought and design to make the program work. Focus on tailoring the training to your own company by addressing your company's unique problems, and think about how your employees might respond to the different variables of a training (such as making it mandatory versus voluntary, or online versus in person). Taking the time to customize the training could go a long way in making the program successful.

Key takeaway: Diversity training can work, but only if the program is tailored to your team and organization.

How to become a diversity trainer

If you are committed to investing in an in-house person to deliver the diversity and inclusion program, make sure the candidate has the knowledge and skill set, as well as the passion and comfort level, to deal with the often-complicated dynamics that arise with these issues.

"To become a diversity trainer, an individual should obtain experience in multicultural and diverse programs, become well versed in diversity and inclusion terminology and definitions, and learn about various instructional design and delivery," Pujo said.

You or your potential in-house trainer can also seek out mentorship programs through associations and networking opportunities. To build your tool kit and increase your expertise, you should consider completing professional credential training to earn a diversity certification. There are various diversity professional training programs, as well as different designations you can earn, including certified diversity trainer (CDT), certified diversity professional (CDP) and certified diversity executive (CDE).

However, as Latham pointed out, there are no perfect certifications that qualify a person to offer diversity training. Sometimes, it's about the skills that aren't so easy to measure.

"To be a good diversity trainer, the person must have both a broad and deep knowledge of the diversity issues facing corporations, must have a commitment to address the elephants in the room and must be a good communicator," Latham said. "In addition, an effective diversity trainer must provide practical advice that the trainees can use to enhance diversity and inclusion in their own workplace."

Key takeaway: To become a diversity trainer, you can explore mentorships and complete professional credential training. However, there is no perfect certification; it's all about skill development.

Best diversity training programs

There are many training programs that can teach employees and managers about diversity, good diverse hiring and promoting practices, and how to build a truly inclusive team. Here are some popular diversity training programs available in 2020:

HRDQ

HRDQ offers a training program called "Diversity Works," which consists of a three-hour workshop and an interactive game. The program can host up to 25 participants and is designed to foster meaningful communication between employees by helping them understand themselves and others.

The cost of "Diversity Works" starts at $999, which is about $40 per employee if you have 25 employees participate. Training refills (which are replenished workshop and activity materials) are available for $500.

Compliance Training Group

Compliance Training Group offers employee training on several topics, including sexual harassment, workplace violence and ethics. The company also offers [diversity and sensitivity training](#) that's designed specifically for employees and managers. The programs can be accessed and completed 24 hours a day and are budget-friendly, at $30 per employee.

eCornell

eCornell is an online learning platform from Cornell University that offers a [workplace diversity and inclusion program](#) designed for business owners, managers and HR professionals. The program is completely online and takes about two months to complete. The course can be purchased for a one-time fee of $3,600 or four monthly payments of $950.

Key takeaway: There are several diversity training programs that cost anywhere from $30 per employee to several thousand dollars for your entire organization.

Additional reporting by Kiely Kuligowski and Sammi Caramela. Some source interviews were conducted for a previous version of this article.

Image Credit:ridofranz / Getty Images

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