

A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING AND USING DIVERSITY

Successfully managing diverse workforces requires the efforts of many people and the deployment of many resources. You as a manager may need help, or may be in a position to recommend professional interventions in your organisation, you may simply want to lobby for greater awareness of diversity and the tools to manage it. Culture is both conscious and subconscious and a part of people's identity, dealing with cultural differences can be both difficult to initiate and may unleash strong emotions once it starts to be addressed. Be prepared!

can be more effective and profitable than they would be if the differences did not exist. The bottom-line question for leaders and managers today is, "How do we create, sustain and direct a workforce and effectively manage an organisation in this diverse and global environment?" Diversity and globalism are two sides of the same coin. The diverse composition of today's workforce and the growing need for workers of every kind, makes people a treasured resource and requires us to pay attention to people's differences, characteristics and needs much more than we did in the past. Here is a partial list of differences among people where diversity efforts address. You may be able to add to the list from your own experience.

WHAT IS DIVERSITY?

Diversity work enables people of different origins and backgrounds not only to work together successfully, but also to value and take advantage of their differences. Their organisations

• Age & generation	• Education	• Religion
• Ethnicity	• Social class /orientation	• Sexual preference
• Gender	• Regionality	• Marital status
• Language group	• Organisational background	• Political party
• Physical ability	• Profession	• Race
• Trade Union Membership	• Family structure & parent status	• Nationality

Equal opportunity and the law is not diversity. It is important and sometimes difficult, particularly in Ireland, to distinguish the larger field of diversity work from long standing equality concerns (equal employment and affirmative action, etc.) that constitute only a part of diversity. Your primary goal is not to simply have a visually diverse workforce, but a productive one.

WHAT KIND OF DIVERSITY WORK DO ORGANISATIONS REQUIRE?

While each organisation's workforce and environment will determine the answer to this question, there are three general categories into which diversity interventions tend to fall.

1. AWARENESS PROGRAMMES.

Programmes that help the organisation to become aware of, respect and positively value the diversity that exists within or around it. This includes awareness of cultural groups (including one's own), their values, behavioural tendencies and lifestyles. It may also involve raising consciousness about inequities and clearing up prejudices that inevitably occur when differing groups begin to work side-by-side or newcomers enter an organisation that is unfamiliar with them. Awareness programmes can range from top management briefings and retreats to international food days in the cafeteria. Awareness programmes are usually followed by trans-cultural skills training and/or organisational development interventions.

2. TRANS-CULTURAL SKILLS TRAINING.

Awareness of differences, needs to be complemented by appropriate changes of behaviour, which enable individuals and teams to work with each other more successfully. Many of these behaviours do

not come naturally to people even though they have become aware of how they are different from each other. There is usually a need for communication skills in which people learn how to speak and listen to each other across cultural boundaries more effectively. Communication skills and training may focus on interviewing, feedback, performance appraisals, motivation, selling and negotiating across cultures, conveying information and mediating disputes between people of backgrounds different from one's own, etc.

3. ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSFORMATION.

Every organisation has a culture all of its own, shaped by the people who founded it and form part of it. Each adds its own unique layer of in-company culture to the dominant national, regional and industry cultures in which it functions. When markets become more global and the nature of the workforce shifts, organisational structures, policies and culture must shift to accommodate the change. On its own, culture is conservative - it changes very slowly, thus special "transition management" interventions may be required to move the organisation into full effectiveness in the post-industrial work culture with all its diversity. You may find it necessary to create or reinterpret the organisational vision and mission, to examine motivational and reward systems for inconsistencies, and to ferret out unfair and dysfunctional institutional biases. As a result, all interventions, training or otherwise, must be an integral part of your organisation's long-term strategy. While short-term progress can be made, culture changes can often take months and years, not days.

HOW DO I GET STARTED WITH A DIVERSITY PROGRAMME?

Most diversity work in organisations follows a four-stage pattern common to