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The Harmonics of Diversity in the Workplace

“If we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity.”—John F. Kennedy

Of all the challenges faced in an increasingly global society—the fabric of which is woven, warp and weft, from economic, political, informational, and cultural threads, to name a few—productive diversity in the workplace is paramount. Census data predicts that by 2050, half of all persons in the United States will be from a non-white, non-Anglo culture. As Philip Bullock, CEO of IBM in Australia and New Zealand says, everyone wants to create a productive and supportive workplace culture but it is challenging because of **accommodating an increasing list of concerns while still delivering business outcomes.**

At the heart of the matter, in human terms, and well-quoted from John Hume, *“Difference is of the essence of humanity. Difference is an accident of birth and it should therefore never be the source of hatred or conflict. The answer to difference is to respect it. Therein lies a fundamental principle of peace: respect for diversity.”*

The matter in legal terms derives from the **Civil Rights Act of 1964 which created the EEOC** (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission). This federal agency is charged with promoting equal opportunity through judicial enforcement of federal civil rights laws as well as through education and technical help. For example, **federal laws prohibit discrimination in employment due to age, disability, national origin, pregnancy, race, religion, sex or gender.** The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) of 1967 prohibits discrimination against those over 40 (some state laws make it 18), and the Americans with Disabilities Act cites as illegal, any discrimination against persons with disabilities including alcoholism or drug addiction.

Philip Bullock, in speaking about creating and maintaining a diverse work environment, says that the big advantage has to do with “attracting and retaining talented people.” Where the cost of staff attrition, recruiting replacements and then training new staff can be high, the costs of accommodations and **proactive programs to address diverse issues are both less expensive, and much more beneficial** to the individuals concerned as well as to the whole organization.

One of IBM’s programs is a **12 week paid parental leave program, which results in 97% of employees returning after their leaves.** Of **disabled employees,** their research shows that these loyal members of the workplace **stay an average of 25% longer than other employees.** While IBM is a huge, global company with disability networking groups, a cultural diversity workplace council and a mentoring program for high-potential women, **other workplaces can institute similar proactive programs** to support, nurture, and benefit from the productivity of their employees.

Diversity - continued

Examples of these programs might include: **self-funded short-term leaves up to four weeks for the purpose of greater work/life balance**, **the ability to telecommute (work from home)** for some percentage of the work week, **affirmative action programs** to take on high school or college interns as well as to employ and train qualified individuals representing a broad spectrum of the community population, and offering a **floating public holiday** program.

Insidious discrimination often occurs in organizations that, on the surface, appear to value diversity. An example, cited by Carl G. Cooper, Chief Diversity Officer for the law firm of Kirkpatrick & Lockhart Nicholson Graham LLP, would be a law firm hiring lawyers from diverse sectors of the community but operating on a double standard with regard to work assignments and expectations.

In today's workplace **managers and supervisors must become proficient in the managerial skills required for a multicultural work environment**. One key managerial asset requires the ability to **promote interdependence among associates** while **respecting and valuing individual differences**. Managers and **supervisors must be proactive in combating discrimination** and promoting inclusiveness according to Kelli Green, Mayra Lopez et al, experts on workplace diversity issues. Managers must be able to **identify negative attitudes and behaviors that are barriers to productivity and positive morale**. These negative attitudes and behaviors **include prejudicial comments or assignments, stereotyping the abilities, intelligence, personality** and the like of some groups, and **outright discriminatory practices** such as only assigning some jobs to men when women should also be considered.

There never were in the world two opinions alike, no more than two hairs or two grains; the most universal quality is diversity.—Michel de Montaigne

When **managers see each employee as a unique human being**, it is possible to recognize and help **each individual to use his or her talents and skills to contribute to the overall accomplishment** of the company or department's goals. Show respect to, and value the contributions of each person, and let these be known to others in the department. **Promote an environment in which people have variety** in their work and **have opportunities to enjoy interacting with coworkers**. **Solicit opinions** and perspective from each person in your staff.

Watson Wyatt's WorkUSA research found that there are **more similarities than differences in what a diverse body of workers agreed** about the inspiration for their commitment to a particular employer. The findings showed that: they **supported their company's business plan**, they had a chance to **use their skills on the job**, their **reward packages were competitive**, and their **company acted on employee suggestions**. Other agreement existed concerning **what employees look for: more consideration of employee input, promoting top performers, and help for worst performers, having a safe work environment and knowing the role of their contributions** in a high quality product or service.

United we stand, divided we fall.—Aesop (620-560 B.C.)

