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A Multi-Level Process Model for Understanding Diversity Practice Effectiveness

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A Multi-Level Process Model for Understanding Diversity Practice Effectiveness

Abstract

Key Findings:

The issue of workforce diversity has been at the forefront of organizational concerns for many years. Not surprisingly, this topic has generated reams of research aimed at shedding light not only on the challenges involved, but also on ways these challenges have been and can be addressed. This paper reports on a comprehensive survey of the most recent studies in an effort to uncover what has been learned and what remains to be examined. While the paper is aimed primarily at researchers, it also offers a number of insights of relevance to managers and others who are responsible for designing and administering diversity-related initiatives in today's organizations.

Initially, the review focused on studies examining particular types of diversity-related policies and practices (affirmative action, targeted recruiting, training, work-life integration, mentoring, etc.) to ascertain what could be said about their general effectiveness. The results were disappointing. No activity was found to be consistently effective; some studies turned up positive relationships, but more often the results were mixed or inconclusive and occasionally even negative.

If, as these findings suggest, organizations cannot rely on specific diversity-related activities to consistently produce favorable results, the logical question to ask is: "Why?" While the authors offer several reasons for this state of affairs, the overall theme that emerges relates to the absence of a holistic view of the situation. To wit:

- Organizations tend to focus too much on popular programs and too little on specific, desired outcome(s). When initiatives are undertaken with no clear goals in mind, it should not be surprising to find that quite often very little is accomplished.
- In too many cases diversity-related activities are studied (and implemented) in isolation and, thus, inadequate attention is given to how new procedures might interact with those already in place to affect outcomes. This is unfortunate, since HR strategy researchers have thoroughly documented the power of mutually-reinforcing "bundles" of activities in numerous studies across a wide variety of settings.
- Many factors come into play between the formal announcement of diversity-related initiatives, bundled or otherwise, and relevant organizational outcomes. To understand why initiatives do or do not work requires that these factors be carefully considered. Are espoused initiatives implemented as planned? Do implemented initiatives result in desired employee behaviors? Do the new employee behaviors produce positive organizational outcomes? And in each case, why or why not? Clearly studies that address all of these questions are difficult to do, but they must be done if we are to have any chance of acquiring the information and insights needed to make the most of current and future diversity-related initiatives. acquiring the information and insights and future diversity-related initiatives.

Keywords

human resources, diversity, workforce

Disciplines

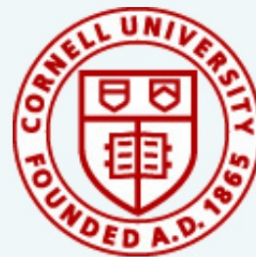
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A Multi-Level Process Model for Understanding Diversity Practice Effectiveness

Key Findings



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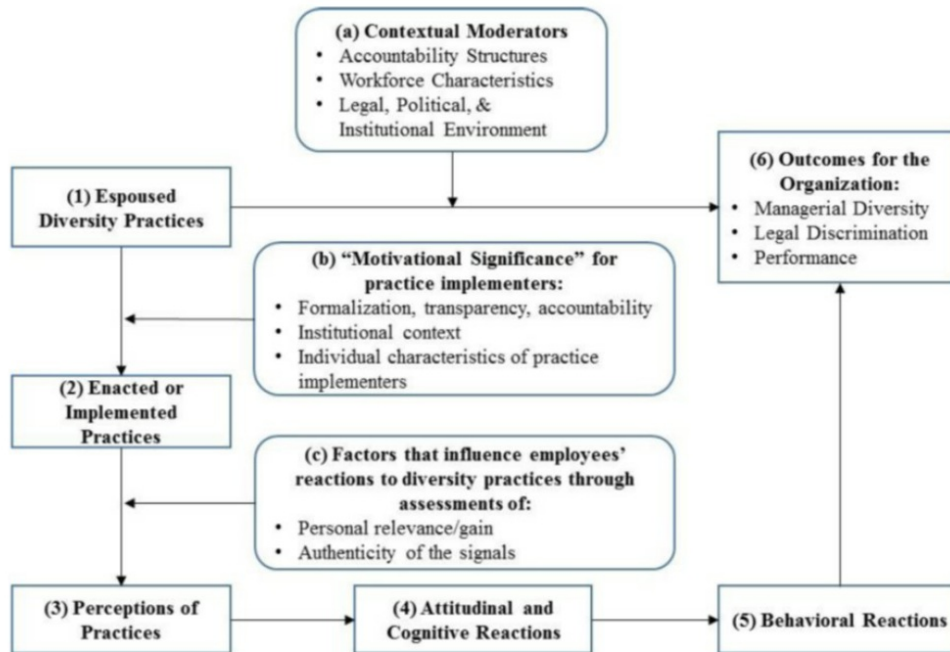
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Implications For Practice

FIGURE 1. Process Model



The Process Model shown in Figure 1 above illustrates the key elements of a holistic approach to designing and implementing diversity-related initiatives.

Again, while this model was developed primarily to guide the design and conduct of future research, it is equally rich with implications for practice. For example:

- When contemplating any new initiative, it is logical to start by asking, "What am I trying to accomplish?" In the diversity domain, as the model suggests, relevant organizational goals come in two forms: representation and performance. Often diversity is defined in terms of representation – the extent to which members of underrepresented groups are present in a workforce. And sometimes this is sufficient. But more commonly the issue of performance comes into play as well; to what extent and in what ways does enhanced representation lead to improved organizational outcomes? Thus, in most cases both types of goals – representation and performance – must be addressed by diversity-related initiatives.
- And it is clear that initiatives designed to achieve representation goals are not necessarily the same as those designed to achieve performance goals, and vice versa (although the two may overlap and reinforce one another to some extent). The main difference is that the former are focused on individual employees while the latter are focused on interpersonal relations and interactions. Thus, initiatives designed to achieve representation goals include programs and activities that increase the likelihood that members of underrepresented groups will be hired, developed, and promoted, while initiatives designed to achieve performance goals include programs and activities aimed at fostering a culture of inclusion; that is, at creating an environment in which the managers and peers of diverse individuals actively seek out, seriously consider, and effectively utilize their ideas and talents. An inclusive environment embraces widely shared norms that truly value diversity and the inherent power of diverse perspectives and capabilities when it comes to making important decisions and critical resource allocations. The idea is to ensure that all managers and employees have the tools, intentions, and autonomy required to be certain that everyone – irrespective of identity group status – makes valuable contributions in pursuit of important organizational outcomes.
- But how to decide on the specific activities and actions to pursue? In practice, of course, solutions will be situation-specific depending on an organization's representation and/or performance goals and on its assessment of the employee behaviors most in need of change.

A Focus on Diversity

Figure 2
Sample Programmatic Possibilities for Enhancing Diversity: Enhancing the Ability, Motivation, and Opportunity (AMO) of Under-represented Group Members

	For Employees	For Managers/Supervisors as Implementors of D&I
Ability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted recruiting to diversify the applicant pool • Careful selection for technical capabilities (not only current readiness, but also potential) • Targeted learning opportunities focused on specific needs of diverse talent • Focused mentoring to provide career-related coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Careful selection for technical capabilities (not only current readiness but also potential) • Careful selection for interpersonal and teamwork skills (readiness or potential) • Training in interpersonal skills (e.g., positive conflict resolution) • Training in teamwork skills (e.g., how to co-produce inclusion as a team member)
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visible representation of identity group members in management (i.e., role models) • Broad range of visible support (e.g., non-discrimination policies, work-life benefits) • Visible leadership commitment to diversity • Fairly implemented employment practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Norms that clearly signal that input and ideas are not only welcome, but expected • Norms that foster the unbiased evaluation of ideas • Norms that support efforts to improve and enhance ideas for value creation • Fair recognition and rewards for positive contributions
Opportunity Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency of and open bidding for positions • Work structures that promote cross-boundary interactions to enhance visibility • Sponsorship for advancement opportunities • Rethinking traditional paths to and definitions of leadership positions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific outreach to be inclusive in membership of important ad hoc teams • Rotational programs that signal expectations concerning participation on multiple teams • Work structures that promote empowered decision-making • Informal activities that promote social interactions among various employee groups

Generic frameworks for thinking through the issues and programmatic possibilities using the familiar ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) heuristic are shown in Figure 2 above, which focuses on diversity, and Figure 3 on page 5, which focuses on fostering an inclusive climate. With respect to representation, for example, usually it is necessary to focus on the attraction, retention, and/or advancement of focal employees. Relevant action steps would assure that these employees: are fully qualified for available jobs [A], perceive these jobs as attractive and rewarding for “people like me” [M], and are actively sought out and encouraged to apply for openings as they arise [O]. When it comes to creating a climate for inclusion, however, attention turns to conditions on and around the job. On the action side, once again it is important that focal employees are fully qualified for the jobs they take [A]. In addition, though, it is important that they be regularly recognized and rewarded for their contributions [M], and that they be free of any undue restrictions – intentional or otherwise – that might constrain their chances to contribute to the full extent of their abilities [O]. In some cases, one or two of these actions may suffice. More often, however, it will be necessary to “bundle” them in broader initiatives that simultaneously address issues of ability, motivation, and/or opportunity.

- Good design is one thing, good implementation is another. It is well-known that diversity-related (as well as other) initiatives promulgated at the top aren’t always carried out as planned. Often this is because middle-level managers and front-line supervisors lack the ability, motivation, and/or opportunity to do what is expected (to return to the familiar framework). Fortunately, researchers have uncovered a number of ways these potential impediments can be addressed and overcome (see box “b” in Figure 1 on page 2, as well as Figures 2 and 3).



- Gaps in ability, for example, may simply reflect the facts that managers are uncertain about what the organization is trying to accomplish and unclear about what is expected of them. Remedies here call for greater transparency regarding goals and, especially, with respect to climate of inclusion. They may also involve increased efforts to formalize diversity-related strategies, as well as supporting policies and initiatives. In addition, it is likely that many, if not most, managers will require some formal training in these matters as well.
- Gaps in motivation boil down to “Why should I”? They may stem from concerns about diversity-related initiatives diverting time and attention away from the “real work” to be done. Or from concerns on the part of non-beneficiaries (e.g., white males) that diversity-related initiatives will disadvantage their particular demographic group. In part, these concerns can be assuaged via extensive communication efforts that emphasize the positive performance effects stemming from enhanced diversity and inclusion, as well as the organization’s unwavering commitment to equal opportunity for all employees. In the end, however, it is axiomatic that in organizations what is measured, is what gets done, especially if money is at stake. Thus, progress toward diversity-related goals should be included in all managers’ performance evaluations and must be actively in play when determining their pay increases and/or bonuses. Research has shown, however, that even here bias can creep in unless further accountability measures are in place. In most cases, then, it will be necessary for HR to carefully assure that diversity considerations have gotten their just due.
- Gaps, or more appropriately perceived gaps, in opportunity often emanate from time-based pressures for production. Both experience and research make it clear that when people are pressed for time or immediate short-term results, they tend to cut corners. One common inclination is to resort to making decisions on the basis of stereotypes or bias rather than logic or rationality. Another is to go all out for increased output to the detriment of all else (as, for example, when managers with tight deadlines ignore work-life policies and insist that subordinates put in long hours – and to do so in the office where they can be watched). One way to combat these tendencies is to carefully monitor managers’ behaviors, especially when they are under the gun. Another is to avoid the tendency to over-reward managers who attain financial or output goals but do so at the expense of diversity and inclusion goals.
- Further, as shown in Figure 1 on page 2, there is an additional component to implementation. It is essential that employees accurately perceive what the organization is trying to do and, thus, remain open to essential changes in their behaviors (as shown in Box “c” of Figure 1). Although employee misperceptions and, thus, concerns could be many and varied, research suggests two common themes. One has to do with concerns about authenticity stemming from the cynicism that often prevails about any new management endeavor. The best way to convey authenticity, of course, is by example; that is, by attaining diversity at the highest levels of the organization, as well as throughout the management ranks, and by assuring that managers have all the support they need in their efforts to incorporate effective diversity practices in their units and functions. The other common theme pertains to concerns about self-interest – “What does this mean for me?” – which may be more prevalent among dominant majorities who feel that they stand to lose stature as a result of the initiative(s) in question. Thus, an additional element of good implementation often involves engaging in direct and repeated communications with all employees who have any reason to believe that they stand to be affected – positively or negatively – by new or altered diversity-related activities.

- Finally, there is the issue of evaluation. Surveys show that many firms undertake often rather elaborate and expensive diversity-related initiatives while making little or no serious effort to evaluate their effectiveness. This is disturbing in light of the academic research suggesting that many such initiatives apparently fail to deliver the intended results. And, of course, no – or poorly designed – evaluation research negates any opportunity to make potentially valuable improvements in initiative design and/or implementation later on. Figures 1, 2, and 3 provide valuable guidance with respect to the framing of credible evaluation research. Understandably, many organizations may lack the expertise necessary to conduct this type of research. If so, this is where CAHRS partnership comes into play. In many cases, our on-campus researchers will be able to provide direct technical and operational assistance. Otherwise, they surely will be well-positioned to provide referrals to qualified researchers at other universities. There should be no hesitancy to ask. Organizations need high-quality evaluations and academic researchers need access to good data – it’s a win-win.

A Focus on Inclusion

Figure 3: Sample Programmatic Possibilities for Enhancing Inclusion - Enhancing the Ability, Motivation, and Opportunity (AMO) of Employees and Managers

	For Employees	For Managers/ Supervisors as Implementors of D&I
Ability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Strong affirmation and clarification of the organizations’ representation goals o Clear guidelines – the “how-to’s” of attracting, developing, and promoting o Training on bias awareness and elimination in decision-making o Training on effective mentoring techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Strong affirmation and clarification of the organization’s inclusion goals o Selection based on inclusion promoting competencies (e.g., team-building skills) o Training in inclusion promoting competencies – the “how-to’s” of developing inclusive climates o Provide opportunities to practice leading inclusive groups on important projects
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Reinforce the business case for representation goals (i.e., an integral part of the “real work”) o Conduct regular assessments of progress against representation goals o Base significant portions of pay increases/bonuses on progress against representation goals o Showcase examples of how representation enhances organizational performance (“win-win”) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Clearly articulate the business case for developing an inclusive climate o Regularly assess the degree of inclusiveness attained – provide constructive feedback o Publicly recognize and praise those who attain performance goals through greater inclusion o Base significant portions of pay increases/bonuses on progress toward inclusion goals
Opportunity Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Include representation responsibilities in position descriptions o Insist on open searches for all job openings (no “inside” candidates) o Define and encourage the adoption of non-traditional paths to leadership positions o Assure that production pressures don’t lead to shortcuts that undermine diversity endeavors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Search for and remove intentional and unintentional barriers to full participation o Encourage the use of diverse ad hoc teams to solve vexing problems o Encourage informal activities that promote interactions among various employee groups o Assure that production pressures don’t lead to shortcuts that undermine diversity endeavors



Specifics of the Study

As mentioned, this review focused on recently published empirical studies, specifically those appearing since 2000. Initially, the authors cast a wide net by using the ISI Web of Knowledge database to locate as many potentially relevant articles as possible. This inclusive pool of articles was then reduced by selecting only the ones that appeared in management, business, sociology, and psychology journals known to have high impact ratings (i.e., to publish studies of sufficient quality that they influence the work of other scholars). At this point, the surviving articles were further reduced by having one or more of the authors read the abstracts and retaining only those articles that appeared to include studies offering clear evidence regarding possible relationships between diversity-related initiatives and various organizational outcomes. In a few cases the abstracts proved to be misleading so a few more articles were dropped along the way. In the end, the review focused on a total of about 100 studies (some articles included multiple studies).

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