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Workplace Diversity Training: Evoking Change or Reinforcing the Status Quo?

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Abstract: In order to effectively support diversity initiatives in our institutions or to develop workplace diversity programs, we need to first define and deconstruct the issues which impede diversity initiatives. The purpose of this roundtable is to discuss how we define diversity; the role social identity plays in supporting and hindering workplace diversity initiatives; the impact of organizational culture or monoculturism on diversity initiative; and ways to address the issues of dominance which undergird organizations.

Overview

A five year study by MIT's Sloan School of Management of companies deemed as committed to workplace diversity produced no data to substantiate improved business performance as a result of diversity initiatives (Hansen, 2003). Over \$8 billion dollars are spent a year on diversity related consultancy, training, and programs, yet 2002 saw the highest number of EEOC job discrimination charges in seven years (Hansen, 2003). Despite data refuting the success of diversity initiatives, these programs are still deemed as strategic imperatives for businesses competing in the global marketplace and are marketed as helping companies attain an economic competitive advantage. In a critical assessment of the diversity industry, Prasad & Mills (1997) argue "this elaborate showcasing of the diversity movement has severely limited our understanding of the more problematic aspects of multiculturalism at the workplace" (p. 12). Cavanaugh (1997) argues that "engaging the diversity project as metaphor is key to gaining an understanding of the resilience of the 'dominant mainstream' tradition in organization theory and culture" (p. 34). He explains that an organization's success is contingent upon much more than a product line. An organization must attend to the signals which it sends to its internal and external constituencies. Thus, what is not being gained in terms of business results may be gained in terms of public opinion.

Defining Diversity within Organizations

The focus of workplace diversity initiatives is to "manage diversity" by developing an environment which recognizes and values all employees and in doing so, provides a competitive advantage to the organization (Thomas, 1991). Yet, diversity is not a unitary concept; rather it encompasses many definitions that often conflict and result in paradoxical effects. A model definition suggested by the Conference Board is that diversity has to do with "culture, class background, socialization and childhood experiences, values and family traditions, political philosophies and philosophical orientations, personality types, preferred methods of absorbing information and learning, age and generational factors, sex roles and sexual orientation, and many more variables" (Wheeler, 1994, p.6). While organizational consultants sell this idea as positive because it separates diversity from social equity and affirmative action (Hays-Thomas, 2004), the negative ramifications are that it reinforces human capital theory which treats people

as economic resources; emphasizes the competitive advantage while ignoring the conflict potential (Prasad & Mills, 1997); promotes the myth of a colorblind ideal (Thomas, Mack, & Montagliani, 2004); and distances diversity from affirmative action-- a program which has effectively increased diversity (Chavez as cited by Hays-Thomas, 2004).

An empirical study of reactions to employee layoffs suggests that despite efforts to broaden the definition of diversity in organizations, social identity plays a role in the workplace often resulting in ethnocentrism and intergroup conflict especially when groups are competing for resources or position (Mollica, 2003). These findings support the argument that defining diversity initiatives as a method for improved performances instead of a social equity program does alleviate the conflicts which arise around group and individual identities (Elmes & Connelley, 1997).

Creating a Culture for Tempered Radicals

One suggestion for bringing about organizational change is by creating a culture of tempered radicalism (Meyerson, 2001). A tempered radical is a person within the organization who spreads seeds and cultivates change from a grass roots perspective. While this may be the only way to survive in some organizations, it is often seen as a sell-out by those who do not think that single individuals or small groups can counterbalance dominant ideology.

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