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The Employee Connection Wellness, Productivity & You!



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Workplace Diversity; Valuing Differences

The phrase “diversity in the workplace” has become a popular buzzword in corporate America, but companies are still trying to determine what that means. For instance, you may have been given the task of announcing a friendly planning luncheon for your small department. You go about making the announcements and publicity for the event, stating, “All are welcome.” Sounds innocent enough, yes? All are welcome. Really?

One of the most important efforts in making sense out of workplace diversity was made by Barbara Walker, a human resource development professional. She developed the concept known as “valuing differences.” This approach focuses on helping people learn to become more open to learn from others that they may regard as ‘different.’ The model is based on the following key points: (1) people work best when they feel valued, (2) people feel most valued when they believe that their individual and group differences have been taken into account, (3) the ability to learn from people regarded as different is the key to becoming fully empowered, and (4) when people feel valued and empowered they are able to build relationships in which they work interdependently.

Today’s workplace needs more than a mere appreciation for diversity, it needs a ‘respectful’ approach on day-to-day operations. How do we practice respect? Self-awareness is an important element. Everyone needs to feel heard. Literature on workplace violence suggests that people who cause violence did not feel anyone was listening to them. Taking time to listen with genuine concern is an important first step. Seeking understanding is a second. To approach communication with curiosity about another person’s point of view helps them to feel valued, even if you don’t agree with them.

Valuing differences is based on paying attention to the many differences that people bring to the workforce. These differences exist in styles of work, thinking and learning, leadership, interpersonal relations, communication, management, and problem solving. Honestly assess just how tolerant you actually are:

- (1) Are you willing to look at your stereotypes, prejudices, and beliefs?
- (2) Identify a co-worker “different” from you, and learn about how their views differ from your own.

Getting a Program Started

Creating diversity in the workplace involves more than the all too familiar issues of race, gender, and multigenerational equity. It involves leaders influencing people to WILLINGLY work toward company objectives. A climate of true workplace diversity means moving beyond comfort zones to build trust.

The following are some objectives to consider in getting a program started:

1. Sustain awareness. Provide information on workplace diversity. Promote it to all staff, highlighting its benefits and contributions to achieving various business goals. Show enthusiasm. Celebrate diversity events. (Cinco de Mayo, etc.)
 2. Demonstrate commitment. Treat others with respect, courtesy, and consideration. Be responsive. Listen to the views of others. Recognize that managers' behavior acts as model for ALL employees. Incorporate diversity into corporate learning and development programs. Support flexible work arrangements.
 3. Maintain a safe, secure work environment. Make sure that all employees are aware of and have reviewed the workplace harassment policy, a code of conduct, etc. Build teamwork. Work to create an environment that **everyone** can participate in. Promote EAPs on the organization's Intranet and make sure that workers know how to access EAP services.
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EAPs Role in Promoting Diversity

EAPs can play a major role in promoting workplace diversity and creating respectful workplaces. Developing seminars or workshops, newsletters, posters that increase self-awareness and cultural awareness may be useful. Promoting effective communication through skill training or development of other communication tools is another option that may address a number of issues. For instance, EAPs may partner with HR to deliver required sexual harassment presentations about diversity at company new hire orientations. Important offshoots are that company clients have effective discrimination policies and the opportunity to encourage that they are routinely enforced.

Many times people in a specific organization have never considered whether it's 'diverse'. Ask yourself if either of the following scenarios were likely to occur where you work, would and ethnic minority person feel...

1. uncomfortable because he/she is the only one in the office aware of a particular ethnic holiday?
2. offended by a comment complaining about 'those people' coming into the country who are making the community feel less safe.

The EAP professional may wish to consider acting out these, and any other scenarios, and then role-play possible solutions.

There will continue to be problems stemming from this changing mix of people. But when people embrace diversity rather than deny it, everyone benefits.

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