



Social Change *or* Status Quo?

APPROACHES TO DIVERSITY TRAINING

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“Diversity training” is an increasingly common approach that organizations are using to address the realities and challenges of the diverse workforce and society. A 2001 industry report by Training Magazine (October 2001, Vol. 38, No. 10) documented that 75% of U.S. companies with 100 or more employees offered diversity training. With so many companies offering diversity training, it is important to determine exactly what is meant by this term.

The term “diversity” has become commonplace, but it is not often clear what is meant by it. Sometimes it is used to include such a wide variety of personal human differences that it seems that nothing is exempt from its banner. Being tall or short, a computer technician or an accountant, an ice cream fanatic or a frozen yogurt lover — the talk is just about differences pure and simple. At other times, “diversity” is used as a euphemism for discussing people of color and racism. Most often, “diversity” is used to discuss a de-politicized kind of cultural pluralism which avoids addressing the more difficult topics of racism and oppression directly. A striking feature of this “diversity avalanche” is how rarely words like “racism” and “oppression” are used. As for diversity training, there are many names, approaches, philosophies, and methodologies that claim the title. Most profess the same ultimate goal of establishing a workplace of respect, dignity, and inclusion for all people. But do they all envision this in the same way?

In my over twenty years of experience, I have identified six basic models of “diversity training”: (1) Intercultural (IC), (2) Legal Compliance (LC); (3) Managing Diversity (MD), (4) Prejudice Reduction (PR), and (5) Valuing Differences (VD); and (6) Anti-racism (AR). In this article, each model is presented in its “purest” form in order to provide some generalizations about the ideological and philosophical basis of each approach. The reader is asked to remember that the models are not quite so rigid, nor are they mutually exclusive, as an initial review of them might imply. There is overlap between them, and they borrow extensively from each other, especially in technique and methodologies. The strategies each approach uses may vary to better suit the

needs of the type of organization where the training takes place, such as schools, businesses, social services, or health care institutions.

Each training approach has strengths that should be recognized and encouraged. There are also limitations involved in each that are at times related to their underlying philosophical systems. The focus of this discussion will be specifically on diversity training approaches used in workplace settings. It will not directly address diversity planning strategies and multicultural organizational development nor will it discuss approaches to multicultural education or the broader issue of multiculturalism in academic institutions (although the models have application for these endeavors). I have arranged them alphabetically, except for anti-racism, which I have placed at the end for reasons that will become evident later in this article.

1. The Intercultural Approach (IC)

The primary focus of the Intercultural Approach is the development of cross-cultural understanding and communication between people and nations. It examines the ways in which human beings speak, reason, gesture, act, think, and believe. It tries to help people develop sensitivity to the cultural roots of one's own behavior, as well as an awareness of the richness and variety of values and assumptions of peoples of other cultures. When you hear terms like “worldviews”, “cultural relativism”, “mores”, “value orientation”, “verbal/non-verbal communication”, and “foreign”, you are likely to be dealing with the IC approach.

In the IC approach, ignorance, cultural misunderstanding, and value clashes are seen as the problem, and increased cultural awareness, knowledge, and tolerance are the solution. Cultural identity and ethnicity are the focus, while racial identity is not often examined. Gender and sexual orientation is explored within the context of culture and tradition, but not within the framework of power and oppression.

Cultural simulation games, that attempt to provide participants with the feeling of encountering a different culture are an IC staple, as are activities that explore the similarities and differences of culturally specific worldviews and values. IC training is most commonly used to prepare people for working abroad and for helping new immigrants adjust to life in their new country.

Unlike some approaches, IC has a well-developed body of literature and professional organizations. A great deal of IC work takes place in international business settings, foreign student exchanges, and places where people of different nationalities come together.

2. *The Legal Compliance Approach (LC)*

The classic Legal Compliance training approach uses words like “Affirmative Action”, “equal opportunity”, and “qualified minorities”. It is based in legal theory, civil rights law, and human resource development strategies. It is primarily concerned with monitoring the recruitment, hiring, and promotional procedures affecting women and people of color so as to increase representation in the organization and comply with anti-discrimination laws.

From a legal compliance perspective, the optimal state of race relations is “colorblindness”, a state in which “people are just people” and differences are not taken into account or remarked upon. In fact, to even acknowledge the obvious visual differences may be interpreted as evidence of prejudice. As a basic assumption and as a desired outcome, colorblindness presents a serious contradiction. Affirmative Action is an explicitly color-conscious policy. Affirmative Action requires organizations to notice information about people relative to their race, ethnicity, and gender in order to ascertain the composition of the workforce. This contradiction leaves people in the paradox of being color-conscious in an effort to become color-blind. Diversity, by definition, is about seeing and valuing differences, but traditional LC approaches do not question the desirability of colorblindness as an ideal state. In reality, however, our differences are not the problem and they can not, and should not, be ignored. The problem is the negative values that are socially assigned to those differences and the resulting unequal distribution of resources, access, power, and respect on the basis of those differences. In the LC approach, assimilation to the dominant culture is also seen as an appropriate goal of diversity efforts. This perspective reinforces the dominant group’s worldview, with the standards of whiteness and maleness remaining intact. Yet our goal should not be the creation of “multi-colored” organizations, but rather truly multicultural ones that reflect the values, histories, and approaches of a wide diversity of people at all levels.

The organizational problem is primarily defined as individual biases, lack of compliance with civil rights law, and exclusionary procedures within the organization. A main driver is often the avoidance of costly discrimination lawsuits. Trainings designed from a strictly legal compliance perspective tend to focus at the managerial level. In this context, discrimination cases may be presented as individual aberrations, not systemic patterns, so intervention is on a case-by case basis. In training terms, this means “fix the bad manager”, rather than understanding patterns of behavior and consequences in the organization.

Legal Compliance training deals almost exclusively with laws, regulations, and requirements. People are told about goals and timetables, but are given little else to understand the changes that are necessary in their work environment. The emphasis is on statistical representation, not on what happens to women and people of color after they are hired, or on how attitudes and behaviors in the work environment supports or hurts their development. This can lead to misguided enforcement that actually reinforces, rather than challenges, “isms”. When implemented this way, it can serve to reinforce the existing stereotypes and increase resistance to legitimate AA/EEO efforts. It also makes diversity training efforts that much harder.

Legal Compliance trainings consists of presentations, lectures, and case studies more often than experiential activities. The legal emphasis of this model also places great limitations on what is covered in training programs. Issues of diversity which are not covered by the federal or state law, such as sexual orientation, may be seen as being outside of the jurisdiction of the program, and therefore omitted.

As a *training* strategy, the Legal Compliance approach can be regulatory and punitive, rather than transformative, and has limited effectiveness in organizational change. As a *legal* strategy, however, the power and necessity of civil rights law and class-action suits are essential, and are recognized as being one of the most effective tools for intervention and change, especially at the state and federal level.

3. *The Managing Diversity Approach (MD)*

Managing Diversity has a very strong presence nationally, particularly in corporations, and receives much attention in the mainstream media. The driving force in MD is that the demographics of the U.S. are rapidly changing. To survive and thrive in the 21st Century, businesses must tap into the diverse labor pool and customer base. One hears phrases like “competitive edge”, “Workforce 2000”, and “the changing demographics”. The term “managing diversity” itself seems to imply that if diversity isn’t “managed”, it will somehow get out of control, begging the question of just who is supposed to be managing whom, and why.

Like the LC approach, MD training usually targets the managers of an organization. While some experiential activities may be included, examination of personal attitudes and behavior are likely to be limited to the business context. Workshops often focus on how stereotypes and prejudice affect hiring and promotional decisions, and undermine team effectiveness, productivity, and ultimately profitability. Conflict resolution techniques may also be included, as may strategies for overcoming obstacles to individual professional development. Racism and sexism are identified as problems to be addressed only inasmuch as

they affect the bottom line.

Much emphasis is placed on seeing diversity as a “business issue”, rather than a legal, political, or moral one. Yet, if a company addresses diversity solely for financial gains, what happens if a CEO sees a way to increase profits by continuing or expanding racist and sexist policies? The contradictions abound. In some cases, corporations thrive because of the very power inequalities diversity and anti-racism initiatives seek to address. Diversity training will be nothing more than window-dressing if corporations are unwilling to address and change destructive corporate practices that foster and maintain inequality and injustice at home and abroad. Dangerous products, environmental racism, multinational expansion and globalization, plant closings, political affiliations—these are all “diversity issues” too.

4. The Prejudice Reduction Approach (PR)

The Prejudice Reduction (PR) model has its roots in the Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) movement. RC theory asserts that all human beings are born with tremendous intellectual and emotional potential but that these qualities become blocked and obscured as we grow older from “distress experiences” — fear, hurt, loss, pain, anger, etc. The RC approach teaches people to help free one another from the effects of these past hurts. As a diversity training model, PR applies the RC framework of exploring and healing past hurts caused by prejudice and bigotry. PR phrases include “guilt is the glue that holds prejudice together”, “healing past hurts”, and “emotional healing”.

PR trainings rely heavily on activities that promote emotional release. Sharing personal stories about how you were hurt by prejudice, exchanging painful lessons about stereotyping, hand holding, and crying are likely to be part of a PR workshop. PR techniques can help get at the emotional core of prejudice, setting the stage for change and activism. However, the focus on personal hurt rather than institutional racism may obscure the very real differences in power and experience of dominant group members and oppressed people. The focus on the personal can be frustrating for some. A participant in this kind of workshop once told me, “We need to stop holding hands and start putting our hands to work.”

5. The Valuing Differences Approach (VD)

The term “Valuing Differences” is sometimes interchanged with “managing diversity”, but they are not the same. Cultural pluralism and the “salad bowl” vision (rather than the “melting pot”) are core beliefs of the VD approach. Rather than ignoring human differences, VD recognizes and celebrates them as the fuel of creativity and innovation. VD sees conflict as the result of an inability to recognize and value human differences, implying that the solution lies in learning about ourselves and one

another. It is similar to MD in that it talks about capitalizing on our differences to help organizations reach their fullest potential. The core value of VD is the recognition of individual uniqueness while also acknowledging different group identities.

VD shares some aspects with other models. VD builds relationships across lines of difference, recognizing the importance of this in a diverse work team. VD also explores stereotypes and cultural differences, and all kinds of human differences may be included. Race and gender are often used as examples, but sexual orientation, language, physical abilities, age, and other personal differences are also addressed. Recognizing the variety of differences can help create a space for deeper evaluation and learning. Everyone can see ways they are “different” in a VD program, and that connection is often the hook that leads people to consider the experiences of others.

The VD approach also has its limitations. VD training tends to be apolitical. Since all human differences are up for discussion, the unique histories and experiences of specific groups may be obscured or diluted. Issues of the privilege and entitlement of dominant group members may not be critically examined. In its effort to be all-inclusive, oppression can be reduced to a “50/50 analysis”, making the false assumption that all groups have equal power to impose their prejudices on others. In fact, from a VD perspective, introducing the power vs. non-power paradigm may be seen as divisive and reinforcing of an “us vs. them” mentality.

The semantic challenges of MD and PR are also found in VD. Terms such as “people with differences” or “diverse people” are common, which begs the question, “Different from whom? Who is the standard?”. These terms are based on a norm of whiteness and maleness. When it is framed in this way, “race” becomes something that people of color have (but not white people), and “sexism” is a “women’s” issue. Defining the dominant group as neutral fails to recognize how the lives of all people are distorted and impacted in societies stratified by race, gender, and other identities.

6. The Anti-Racism Approach (AR)

Anti-Racism is at the heart of the “diversity movement”, for without it, the other approaches would not exist. It is activist in focus and firmly rooted in the civil and human rights struggles in the U.S. and internationally. Based on an understanding of the history of racism and oppression, this expressly political approach emphasizes distinctions between personal prejudice and institutional racism. The goals are not limited to improved interpersonal relations between people of different races, but include a total restructuring of power relations. Terms such as power, oppression, and activism are common in this approach. The use of the word

“racism” itself may indicate this approach, as followers of other models may tend to avoid it.

“Old Style” Anti-Racism Training

AR training developed in the 1960's, although it's predecessors include the “race relations” training movement of the 1940's and 1950's, as well as the many, often anonymous efforts throughout history that brought people of color and white people together to challenge racism. In what I call “Old Style AR”, training tended to focus on educating White people, and was often confrontational. The bold, “in-your-face” activities sounded an alarm that motivated some to anti-racist action, but left others feeling blamed, guilty, angry, and powerless.

“Old Style AR” could be dramatic and self-righteous, and attention to the personal, emotional level was sometimes lost in the rhetoric. “Old-style AR” focused almost exclusively on black/white issues. The struggles of other racial groups were not fully included, and there was a reluctance to explore sexism and heterosexism. As a result, multiracial groups did incredibly powerful organizing and civil disobedience, but they often recreated internally the same racial and gender power dynamics that they were struggling against externally.

Anti-Racism Training Today

Anti-racism training and education has grown and evolved over the years. It is sometimes called “Liberation Theory” or “anti-oppression work” to expand the focus beyond race, and acknowledge the connection to other forms of oppression. I am convinced that, combined with techniques and strategies from the other models, it can help us build authentic social change. The problem with “old-style AR” was not the analysis of power or the goal of total restructuring; it was in the process used to achieve that ends. The importance of making space for the personal part of this work was not fully recognized, nor had we yet developed the skills to facilitate change effectively.

“New-style AR” draws from the knowledge of the other approaches. It takes a knowledge of cultural dynamics from the Interculturalists and an understanding of the need for legal supports from the Legal-Compliance approach. From Managing Diversity models, it takes the recognition of the impact of diversity on organizational effectiveness. Like Prejudice Reduction, it is committed to emotional exploration and healing, and like Valuing Differences, it focuses on a wide spectrum of human differences.

“New Style AR” takes all these in and adds an analysis of power and oppression. Approaches which define the core problem as one of exclusion, and promote equal access to and inclusion in the dominant culture, ultimately reinforce existing hierarchies. The underlying structures of domination and subordination remain, even if the players and the trappings change.

Anti-racism holds that the core culture and institutional structures must fundamentally change, while recognizing that changes in our personal attitudes are also essential. It examines the parallels, intersections, and distinctions between all forms of oppression, although the focus remains on issues of racism and white supremacy. Bringing in concepts of dominant group privilege and of internalized oppression, anti-racism addresses both dominant and oppressed group members, and makes connections to other forms of oppression.

At its best, anti-racism training, in its new form, links the micro-analysis and the macro, the personal and the political. It requires deep self-examination and requires action in our personal, professional, and political lives. It is inclusive and transformative, and not additive, reformist, or assimilationist.

Conclusion

As this article has documented, the label “diversity training” harbors many underlying philosophies and approaches, and it is critical to understand which model you choose for your organization. I am concerned about the current trend toward the professionalization and commercialization of the “diversity industry” and often struggle with the contradictions implicit in doing this kind of work “for a living”. I am mindful of the potential for my own complicity in the very practices and assumptions I have raised here for examination. My observations and ideas are offered in a spirit of critical discourse that challenges all of us engaged in these efforts to examine the profound implications of the work that we do. Ultimately, we must remember that “what we want is a new transformed society, not equal opportunity in a dehumanized one.” (Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*, Vintage Books, 1983).

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