Managers Must Become Multicultural

Here's how to manage for diversity.

BY CARLOS CONEJO

You're probably discovering that today's workforce is a cultural salad bowl. Everyone's in the same bowl but striving to keep their own identity or culture. At the same time, you're probably discovering that the old ways of managing are just not working.

Test your organization's multicultural quotient.

- **Are ideas that your managers discussed** at staff meetings and thought were crystal clear totally misunderstood by the workforce?
- **Do tempers flare** within different cultural groups at the slightest provocation?
- **Is service suffering** due to ineffective communication?
- **Do you suspect** that workers' problems are tied to cultural differences, but don't know what to do?

Solving such problems isn't easy; managing in a multicultural world is a tremendous undertaking. Here are four steps to start you on your way:

Step #1: Identify the diversity.

This is more difficult than it sounds. Start by collecting data about your workforce. You'll be amazed at the number of identifiable cultural groups. There are at least 25 major cultural groups in today's work environment, and there may be several sub-groups in each of these groups.

Don't generalize. Doing so is dangerous and could be fatal to your organization. For example, if you are located in the Southwest, don't assume all your Latino workers are Mexican.

Step #2: Discover the norms.

Once you know how many different backgrounds you have in your organization, find out more about each one.

Peruse reference materials at the library or on the Internet, or hire an ethnoculturalist or cultural-change consultant. Don't overlook your employees as a source of cultural information. Create learning opportunities at every turn. Ask people what the favorite or lucky colors in their country are, what family norms are common, what they value most. You can also learn plenty by practicing MBWA–Management By Walking Around. Look, listen, ask, and learn!

Step #3: Understand the differences.

Different cultures gather, process, and interpret information differently. Hispanic employees from different countries have different words for the same thing. In some cultures, there is no guilt as we know it, no Heaven or Hell; instead, there may be karma. Such differences, if not understood, may cause communications barriers, cooperation problems, and an uneven playing field.

Step #4: Develop a plan of action.

Encourage employees to create affinity groups such as Hispanic or Asian or African American clubs. Better yet, create a mentoring and learning track, which will focus employees on mutual collaboration and your organization's common goals and objectives. When they get to know each other better, then you will get cooperation.

Know what true diversity is.

Diversity is the spectrum of human similarities and differences. From this definition, building diversity in your organization means representing people with a range of similarities and differences. It means paying attention to values, norms, culture, gender, race, communication, comfort zones, interpretation, and behavior styles. Managing for diversity takes extra time, but doing so is crucial.

Resources

Akpeki, Tesse, "Diversity Is an International Issue," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 16, No. 4.

Ellis, Susan, "Bring the World to Your Door: Tapping International Volunteers," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 1.

Glasrud, Bruce, "Beyond Diversity," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 2.

Glasrud, Bruce, "Brave New Workers in a Brave New Workplace," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 6.

Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Personnel and Human Resources Development.*

Smith, George, "How We Don't Communicate," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 16, No. 2.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org.

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The Case for Diversity

Diversity is the spectrum of human similarities and differences. From this definition, building diversity in your organization means representing people with a range of similarities and differences.

A focus on diversity has never been more crucial. Emphasizing diversity is a practical choice, based on rapidly evolving U.S. demographics. Recognizing the opportunity, nonprofits are spearheading mandates for multicultural workforces and emerging-markets strategies.

Shifting Demographics

Census information showing Latinos have increased their presence in the U.S. population by 58% over the past 10 years, and now rival African Americans as the dominant ethnic minority, is impacting the marketing strategies of nonprofits throughout the nation.

1. African Americans: The second largest ethnic group in the nation, with 36.4 million people, African Americans own more businesses than ever before and live in affluent enclaves unknown to most marketers.

2. Latinos: With a population of 35.3 million people, Latinos comprise 12.5% of the U.S. population, having grown 58% over the past decade. Mexican Americans are the largest ethnic group among U.S. Latinos, followed by Puerto Ricans.

3. Asian Americans: As the third largest minority group with 10.2 million people, Asian-American representation is growing rapidly in fields such as engineering. The largest Asian-American group is Chinese, followed by Filipinos and Asian Indians.

4. Gays: Estimates of the number of gays and lesbians vary from 3 to 10% of the population. About 20% of gay/lesbian households have children, compared to 40% of heterosexual households.

5. Women: Women now account for 46.6% of the U.S. workforce and hold almost half the managerial and leadership positions at Fortune 500 companies.

Recruitment

The recent downturn has put more multiethnic talent on the market and represents a critical opportunity for organizations to recruit these workers. Women and people of color will represent about 70% of new entrants to the workforce by 2008. An organization that already has a reputation as an employer of choice will find it easier to attract more diverse candidates.

Retention

Losing an employee costs about four times that person's salary. Multiply that figure by the organization's rate of turnover and the numbers become large.

One proven method for retaining multicultural employees is to build strong employee networks. Another is to maintain detailed metrics that are tied to bonuses.

Supplier Diversity

Organizations with a diverse supplier base are more successful in gaining access to multicultural markets. Diverse suppliers provide flexibility and significant cost savings.

Measurable Results

Nonprofit organizations have begun to make the direct empirical connection between diversity and competitive advantages. Clear and measurable results provide answers for funders, board members, top managers, and the entire organization.

By the way, the two languages to learn for the next millennium are Spanish and Chinese. Latinos are America's fastest growing minority group, and China's Gross National Product (GNP) will surpass the U.S. GNP in about 20 years.

For more information, see www.diversityinc.com and www.diversitycentral.com. Both Web sites provide resources on diversity and cross-cultural management and links to other diversity-related services.

How Diverse Is Your Organization?

Answer these questions to see if your organization supports diversity in name only or if you have a truly multicultural organization.

- **Are different demographic groups represented** at all levels of your organization?
- **Do all employees have equal access** to opportunity?
- **Is respect for differences** a key organizational value?
- **Do you have equitable systems** to reward employees?
- **Has your organization demonstrated** commitment to community relationships?
- **Do you provide diversity training** to employees?
- **Does your organization accommodate** different physical and developmental abilities?
- **Do you offer** collaborative conflict resolution?
- **Are unspoken organizational norms aligned** with stated organizational goals?
- **Do you share power** with others?
- **Are different demographic groups represented** among internal and external stakeholders?
- **Does your organization represent people** with a wide range of similarities and differences?
- **Do you reward** innovation and creativity?
- **Is your organization flexible,** responsive, and agile?
- **Do you encourage** employee affinity groups, support groups, and networks?
- **Are you committed to continuous learning** for yourself and your employees?
- **Do you build teamwork** and collaboration into the work environment?
- **Have you secured commitments** from above, below, and outside your organization?

Refuse to Tolerate Intolerance

Here's a common scenario: A co-worker makes a racial slur, and no one protests it. You feel uncomfortable, but how do you speak up against it?

The key is to say something without lecturing. Simply state how the remark makes you feel and that you'd rather those types of comments not be made in your presence. Keep yourself as a point of reference and the offending party won't get as defensive.

Remember that in today's multicultural workplace, building a tolerant environment is crucial. Workers need to speak up not only to signal that they don't tolerate intolerance but also to spare the organization a discrimination lawsuit.

—adapted from *Newsday*

Bridge Language Gaps

Diversity in the workplace makes for a rich environment, but it can also leave room for miscommunication. Try these tips to ensure that your foreign-language speakers at work don't miss a beat:

- **Hold regular staff meetings.** Limit the number of topics you'll discuss to help workers learn how to process oral information. Such a strategy will keep meetings short and prevent employees from being overwhelmed.

- **Always provide written directions.** Foreign-language speakers often can understand written English better than the spoken word.

- **Learn some phrases yourself.** It helps morale and lets workers know you appreciate and care about them enough to pick up a few phrases in their native tongues.

—adapted from *Inc.*