



# The Failure of Diversity Training

*Is there a better way to prevent workplace discrimination?*

BY JUDY ZHU & BRIAN KLEINER

**D**iscrimination and harassment are important nonprofit issues because they can create an unhappy workforce, undermine productivity and quality, and invite costly lawsuits and penalties. Many organizations have tried to reduce discrimination and harassment through diversity training. These training programs have failed for several reasons:

## Goals Aren't Realistic

One problem with diversity programs is that their approach is too broad. They often cover history, culture, ethnicity, gender, race, age, disabilities, politics, religion, sexual orientation, and values in one session. It's unrealistic to think that employees can understand complex principles and apply them to interpersonal relationships after a few hours of training.

## Top Managers Aren't on Board

Diversity training often doesn't receive top-management support. Without commitment from everyone in the organization, especially those at upper levels, a program has no chance of succeeding.<sup>1</sup>

## A National Backlash Is Raging

Diversity training has fueled the fires of a national backlash. Many people have come to believe that the point of diversity training is to change white men. As part of this counterrevolution, reverse discrimination has taken center stage. A 1996 study by Princeton Survey Associates found that people believe, by a two-to-one margin, that discrimination against whites is a bigger problem than racism.

## Lawsuits Have Increased Rather than Decreased

Diversity training has fallen far short of its promised results. Rather than decreasing, discrimination lawsuits have proliferated. From 1990 to 1994, there was a 34% increase in claims and a 38% increase in dollars awarded to individuals as a result of claims for sex, race, age discrimination, and sexual harassment.<sup>2</sup>

## A Set of Action Steps Is Needed

Diversity training's focus on understanding and valuing human differences doesn't reduce workplace

*Reverse discrimination has taken center stage.*

discrimination. The training hasn't provided the relationship skills necessary to work effectively with those who believe differently. Dispensing information about how differences such as race, creed, or lifestyle might affect employees without offering a set of techniques to manage those differences is pointless.

The way to reduce discrimination is to change the organization's culture—something that only top managers can do. Here are the corrective steps to take:

## I. STOP THE DENIAL

The first step is to admit that discrimination and harassment exist in the workplace. They result from behavior patterns deeply ingrained in our society and thus have become part of our organizations' cultures. These illegal and counter-productive

Nonprofit World • Volume 18, Number 3 May/June 2000  
Published by the Society for Nonprofit Organizations  
6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, WI 53719 • (608) 274-9777  
www.danenet.org/snpo



*Rather than decreasing, discrimination lawsuits have proliferated.*

behaviors are acted out through refusal of employment, lack of promotions, limited opportunities, sexual intimidation, verbal slurs, negative body language, discounting, devaluing, excluding, negative labeling, and violence. The law states that organizations aren't legally responsible for what employees think or feel, but they *are* liable for employee behavior on the job.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, organizations must focus on behavior, not beliefs.

Changing a culture from within is tricky. Thus, the best idea is to hire an employment-practice professional to conduct an audit of your organization. Such auditors can tell you if behavior in your workplace meets legal requirements. They can also suggest ways to improve. It is helpful to conduct such audits at least once a year, especially early in the change process.

## II. REMOVE THE DIVERSITY LABEL

Some experts recommend eliminating the use of the term "diversity" in training programs.<sup>4</sup> The term lacks precision and has a negative connotation to many people. It elicits divisive reactions from workers who would rather be treated as individuals than labeled as part of a group. Thus, it's better not to use such labels.

## III. ESTABLISH A ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICY

Your organization must commit to a plan that offers specific action steps. There are five important steps to this plan:

### 1. Create a Written Policy

As a preventive measure, you need to adopt a clear, written anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policy. This policy should be part of your organization's mission and vision statements, and it should be posted in a prominent place. In this policy, do the following:

- **Warn employees** that discrimination and harassment are illegal under state and federal law.
- **Provide an anti-discrimination mission statement.** This statement should specify that discrimination and harassment are contrary to the policies set forth by the organization, that infractions won't be tolerated, and that unlawful behavior will result in immediate discipline.
- **Give examples** of the types of behavior prohibited.
- **Reinforce the organization's commitment.** Emphasize that all discrimination and harassment complaints will be investigated promptly and thoroughly, and anyone found guilty will be disciplined accordingly.
- **Spell out discipline procedures.** Make it clear exactly what will happen to those who break the rules. Be sure the consequences relate directly to the misconduct and aren't left up to individual interpretation or whim.
- **Describe audit procedures.** Explain that regular audits of the policy will be made by professional auditors.

### 2. Hold an Employee Orientation Program

Be sure all employees attend an orientation and education program describing your organization's discrimination policy. This program should specify what conduct is acceptable and what isn't. It should clarify discipline measures to be applied to unacceptable behavior.

### 3. Put a Complaint System in Place

A discrimination policy is of little value without a way for people to report unacceptable behavior. They should be able to make such reports both formally and informally. Be sure you have a clearly defined complaint procedure that protects both the person who complains and the person who is accused.

### 4. Provide an Accountability Procedure

It is essential to investigate all complaints promptly, thoroughly, and consistently. A team of impartial investigators should be assigned to interview the accuser, the accused, and the witnesses.

Inappropriate behavior should be answered with swift, decisive action which clearly shows that the behavior won't be tolerated. Appropriate discipline may include counseling. In flagrant or repeat cases, it may be necessary to discharge the offender.

### 5. Offer an Appeals Process

Be sure to create an appeals process for those who are charged. Also implement a reporting method so that employees know the results of actions taken and how the charges have been resolved.

## IV. DEMONSTRATE YOUR COMMITMENT

The solution to reducing discrimination and harassment lies in redirecting the focus from diversity training to behavior modification.

***Focus on  
behavior, not  
beliefs.***

Establish no-nonsense behavior standards, and make it clear that there will be zero tolerance for discriminatory behavior.

Provide ongoing communication to keep your discrimination policy highly visible. Show your commitment through prompt handling of every complaint, and be firm and consistent in penalizing proven discriminators or harassers. ■

**Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Verespej, M., "Zero Tolerance-Movements Against Workplace Discrimination and

Harassment," *Industry Week*, Vol. 246, Jan. 6, 1997.

<sup>2</sup>As reported by the 1994 National Database, such claims rose from 75,258 to 100,978 and awards increased from \$130 million to \$180 million during this five-year period.

<sup>3</sup>Curry-Swan, L., *Managing Equally and Legally—A Practical Business Guide to Preventing Discrimination Complaints and Termination Lawsuits*, 1990.

<sup>4</sup>Hemphill, H. and R. Haines, *Discrimination, Harassment, and the Failure of Diversity Training*, 1997.

**Selected References**

Brinckerhoff, Peter, "Nonprofits & the Americans with Disabilities Act," *Nonprofit World*, March-April 1993.

Conroy, Charles, "Sexual Harassment: Don't Let It Destroy Your Organization," *Nonprofit World*, March-April 1992.

Lauer, Larry, "Using Your Organization's Culture to Build Productivity," *Nonprofit World*, November-December 1993.

Mahoney, John, "Protect Yourself Against Employee Lawsuits," *Nonprofit World*, March-April 1997.

Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Law & Taxation, Leadership Series, Vol. I & II*.

Sills, Stephen & Scott H. Smith, "The Emperor's New Clothes, Or How to Protect Against Lawsuits and Other Chilling Surprises," *Nonprofit World*, November-December 1995.

These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center (608-274-9777).

---

*Judy Zhu is a graduate of the University of Beijing and has additional experience working and studying in the United States. Brian H. Kleiner, Ph.D., is professor of human resource management at California State University, Fullerton. You may contact the authors at 551 Santa Barbara Avenue, Fullerton, California 92835-2463.*