

An Active Learning Model of Diversity Training



United States companies spend an estimated \$8 billion dollars annually on diversity training, which currently is a fixture in nearly all Fortune 500 companies, as well as a majority of mid-sized firms. Naturally, researchers have studied these efforts to a fare-thee-well attempting to ascertain why some succeed, while others don't. Much of this research is solid and potentially useful, but it is also discouragingly difficult to locate and often tough to decipher. As an antidote, the authors of this study not only conducted an extensive search and analysis of the relevant literature, but also integrated their findings into a comprehensive active learning model of diversity training. While meant primarily for researchers, the model also provides theoretically and empirically sound guidance for program designers and administrators. Here's how:

KEY FEATURES OF THE ACTIVE LEARNING MODEL

The active learning model (ALM), shown in Figure 1 on page 2, is:

- **Behaviorally based.** That is, most applicable when the ultimate goal of training is to foster behavioral change in the workplace.
- **Holistic.** It Incorporates three forms of learning: cognitive (enhancing knowledge and understanding), affective (coping with negative feelings and emotions), and of course behavioral (fostering desired behaviors).
- **Learner-centered.** Training interventions require learners to set their own learning goals and, subsequently, decide how to pace themselves and allocate their efforts during the training process. The role of trainers is to provide essential support and guidance along the way.
- **Contextually facilitated.** Program designers utilize supportive contextual characteristics (e.g., culture, leadership commitment) initially and then at key spots during the learning process to reinforce the learning and keep learners motivated.



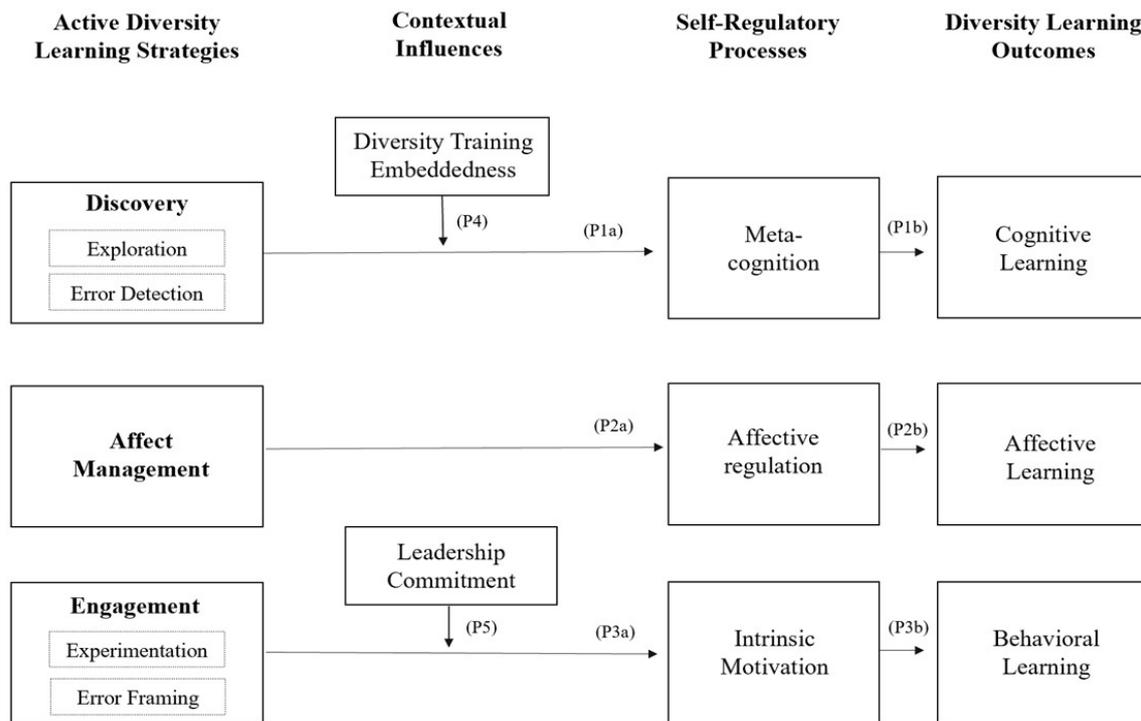


Figure 1: An Active Learning Model of Diversity Training

PUTTING THE ALM MODEL TO WORK

The initial step, as usual, is to be crystal-clear about the ultimate objective(s) of the training. Consider, for example, an organization that, as part of a larger diversity initiative, aims to eradicate sexual harassment from its ranks. In this instance, and in line with the ALM model, the training would center on three desired outcomes:

Cognitive Learning: As Figure 1 above shows, cognitive learning involves discovery. In the case posed, learners would be encouraged to reflect upon and ultimately learn all there is to know about sexual harassment and how to control it. Initially, it is up to trainers to identify what learners need to know and to prepare a curriculum consisting of multiple modules (e.g., definition of sexual harassment, laws and company policies governing the topic, how to recognize potentially improper activities, how to report these activities, etc.). Learners initially receive sufficient information about the curriculum to form individual learning strategies. They form their own learning goals, noting which material they can safely skip or skim and which will require more of their time and attention, move through the curriculum at their own speed, self-monitor as they go, and adapt as necessary. Trainers intervene only to assist those who struggle and to ascertain when learners have mastered the material.

Research shows that discovery learning works best when embedded within a supportive organizational context (Figure 1). A context that conveys a high degree of organizational commitment to diversity serves to enhance the perceived importance of sexual harassment training and, thus, to keep learners in a discovery mode. Further, insights from broader diversity-related initiatives may provide tips that help learners craft, evaluate, and revise their learning strategies as they proceed through the training.



Behavioral Learning: Behavioral learning follows cognitive learning; the aim is to engage learners in the application of what they have learned. Again, the emphasis is on learner-centered interventions, this time aimed at experimentation with behaviors directly relevant to the work setting. In the case of sexual harassment, this would involve behaviors to avoid, as well as those to pursue (e.g., prompt reporting of violations). Action-oriented Interventions – incidents, cases, role-playing and the like – embed learners in realistic situations providing opportunities to practice responses, make errors, receive timely and constructive feedback, and internalize the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. Done well, the process activates a desire to learn, builds confidence in handling tricky situations, and of course promotes desired behaviors back on the job.

As Figure 1 suggests, behavioral learning benefits from leadership commitment to diversity. It helps when executives address learners during training, in this case to reinforce the company's intolerance of sexual harassment – preferably using vivid, suitably sanitized examples – again, while reinforcing the value of the training. And, of course, it certainly helps when executives serve as positive role models.

Affective Learning: Affective learning is a key component of training that challenges learners' deeply held beliefs, which of course includes most diversity programs. It has both cognitive and behavioral elements. Specifically it requires learners to develop a deep understanding of the biases and emotions that might interfere with learning – and/or appropriate behavior on the job – and then to develop coping mechanisms to mitigate the negative effects of these feelings. Affective learning can stand-alone (as in unconscious bias training), although integration with the other elements of the ALM is preferable. To combat the likelihood that sexual harassment will often go unrecognized or unreported, for example, the cognitive learning segment of a program would include a module designed to explore why this occurs, as well as ways to mitigate its undesirable effects. The behavioral learning segment would then embed simulations with instances of harassment that are ambiguous or potentially risky to report, requiring learners who fail to see or follow through on violations to identify why and to role-play what might be done about it - certainly, during training, but also in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

Diversity training has been a key component of diversity management efforts for decades. All-too-often, though, it has failed to do the job, commonly because it lacks a solid conceptual underpinning. The ALM overcomes this problem by offering a comprehensive, as well as theoretically- and empirically-based approach. Although it may be more time-consuming and costly in the short run, it promises to make a far more meaningful impact longer-term. Those interested in learning more about the ALM and its potential application in their firms should contact Professor Brad Bell at CAHRS.



This ResearchBrief by the three authors below is based on the working paper "An Active Learning Approach to Diversity Training."



Quinetta Roberson
Connally, Hannah Professor,
Michigan State University



Ozias A. Moore, Assistant
Professor, Lehigh University



Brad Bell, William J. Conaty
Professor of Strategic HR
Studies and CAHRS Academic
Director, Cornell ILR School

