

IMPACT BRIEF

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Putting the Focus on Diversity: The Differences Do Matter

Question: What can diversity professionals and organizational leaders do to make diversity more than just a token concept within their organizations?

Conclusion: In many organizations, a range of policies, practices, and procedures negatively affect racial minorities by reinforcing, often inadvertently, biases based on race, gender, and sexual orientation. Initiatives aimed at bolstering diversity throughout the workplace will fail unless they confront and topple these underlying institutional barriers. Truly diverse organizations facilitate the positive expression of minority identities without requiring minority employees to assimilate (that is, lose their identities) as a precondition of success. Moreover, progressive organizations unapologetically address issues of subtle bias imbedded in policies, practices, and procedures.

Workplace impact: The challenge of creating and sustaining diverse and bias-free organizations falls to organizational leaders as well as to diversity professionals. Both cohorts must critically examine how discriminatory institutional structures play out at the individual, group, and organizational levels and then change the flawed policies, practices, and procedures. Diversity should be evaluated by measurable and substantive workplace outcomes, not by the number of

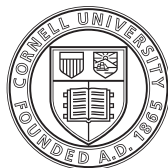
public relations events, awards, donations to minority organizations, and the like.

Abstract: The recent propensity among executives and diversity professionals to focus on “inclusion” as opposed to “diversity” ignores the reality that differences do matter. On the surface, inclusive organizations seek to blur, or trivialize, distinctions among people and wind up bolstering the standards and expectations set by the dominant white, male, heterosexual ideology. Even well-intentioned organizations often adopt policies, practices, and procedures that replicate the racism, sexism, and heterosexism manifest in society at large. The consequence is a perception of “normal” and “acceptable” that excludes minorities and inhibits their chances of workplace success.

Organizations that embrace diversity, on the other hand, are more realistic and honest in their outlook and operational structures. They stay ahead of the law instead of merely striving toward legal compliance. They adopt policies, practices, and procedures that shift the power dynamics away from the historically and culturally favored group. If, for example, an organization committed to diversity prefers to promote from within, its policies, practices, and procedures will generate a pool of internal candidates that varies by race, gender, and sexual orientation. Organizational leaders and diversity professionals should be at the forefront of these efforts.

Organizations and their leaders can better grasp the challenge of diversity by looking at it from three van-

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tage points: What are the *individual* biases, beliefs, and behaviors that perpetuate the “isms” and interfere with the management of a diverse workforce? How do *groups* within the organization marginalize minority employees? How do the *organization’s* structure and systems oppress some groups while preferring others? Only honest reflection will enable executives and diversity professionals to ferret out the answers that lay the groundwork for change.

Source publication: “Viewpoint: The Need for a Critical, Institutional Approach to Diversity in Organizations” appeared in *The Diversity Factor*, Winter 2006, Volume 14, Number 1.

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