

Why Diversity Training is Ineffective

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Do lawyers have the rights skills to provide meaningful workplace training? Disconnected from values, all too often "diversity" training breeds cynicism and resentment.

Most diversity training efforts at American companies are ineffective and even counterproductive in increasing the number of women and minorities in managerial positions, according to an analysis that turns decades of conventional wisdom, government policy and court rulings on their head.

A comprehensive review of 31 years of data from 830 mid-size to large U.S. workplaces found that the kind of diversity training exercises offered at most firms were followed by a 7.5 percent drop in the number of women in management. The number of African Americans and female managers fell by 10 percent, and the number of black men in top positions fell by 12 percent. Similar effects were seen for Latinos and Asians.

The analysis did not find that all diversity training is useless. Rather, it showed that mandatory programs - often undertaken to avoid liability in discrimination lawsuits - were the problem. When diversity training is voluntary and undertaken to advance a company's business goals, it was associated with increased diversity in management.

Today, U.S. businesses spend from \$200 million to \$300 million a year on diversity training, but the new study is one of the first attempts to systematically analyze its impact. What it found is that programs work best when they are voluntary and focus on specific organizational skills, such as establishing mentoring relationships and giving women and minorities a chance to prove their worth in high-profile roles.

"When attendance is voluntary, diversity training is followed by an increase in managerial diversity," says Alexandra Kalev, a sociologist at the University of Arizona, who led the research. "Most employers, however, force their managers and workers to go through training, and this is the least effective option in terms of increasing diversity. . . . Forcing people to go through training creates a backlash against diversity," she is quoted as saying to the *Washington Post*.

I agree. I have conducted diversity training at hundreds of companies over the last decade. And although I am a lawyer, diversity training has often been characterized by most employers as a legal, not a business issue.

If they are doing it for legal protection, most employers really don't care whether the training works. It is hardly surprising that training could have counterproductive effects when the attitude often is, "Just do it, and just do it as cheaply as possible." This approach leaves employees feeling cynical and distrustful of the company and in the worse case sows the seeds for conflict.

The main reason for ineffective diversity training is that employers and lawyers have created an adversarial workplace. True, the U.S. Supreme Court has held that companies with mandatory training are in a stronger position if they face a discrimination lawsuit. But training supervisors on the law and to avoid liability has nothing to do with diversity training. Diversity is about interpersonal communication, cultural competency and business success. It's social and voluntary.

Employers cannot impose diversity on employees. It's a counterproductive approach that will more likely than not backfire. Instead, employers should make the business case of why employees are better off embracing diversity than not.