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The Power of Mentoring To Support Diversity Initiatives

There is a strong business case for diversity initiatives. Baby boomers are aging and remaining in the workforce longer, companies are conducting more business globally, women are playing a stronger role in executive teams and a growing number of minorities are entering the U.S. workforce.

Today's workforce is evolving, and the best companies are responding to it by offering diversity initiatives to expand understanding and encourage collaboration across different demographics. That's good news, but there's still a big problem – **most diversity initiatives don't go far enough**. And companies that offer insufficient programs are wasting time and money.

While diversity initiatives often do a good job at educating people on the challenges and obstacles faced by women, minorities or seniors in the workplace, they stop there. The result is that behavior never changes, so the companies fail to realize the value they're seeking by investing in these programs.

For example, a white male attends a training class in diversity. He completes the course feeling more sensitive to the issues facing minorities in the workplace. But then he never interacts with employees who are different from him, so he loses the opportunity to change his behavior in a meaningful way.

The desired behavior changes that diversity initiatives aim to achieve cannot occur without real-life interactions in the workplace. So how can a company ensure that the money they spend on diversity initiatives yields desired results? By executing a mentoring program to supplement the training.

How Mentoring Promotes Real Diversity

The goal of mentoring is to pair talented, experienced employees to serve as mentors for promising, less experienced employees, or mentorees, within an organization. Ideally, over time, the mentoree gains skills, knowledge and a better understanding of the organization. The mentor, in turn, typically gains a new perspective and learns about an area of the organization that was unknown previously.

The true benefit and impact of mentoring is often seen not in achieving goals and objectives, but in the personal exchange between the mentor and mentoree. Successful mentoring creates real relationships and

the opportunity for positive behavioral changes – an outcome that is especially beneficial for companies committed to promoting diversity.

A good mentor focuses on the mentoree's total development – coaching the mentoree and teaching specific skills, but also sharing resources and network contacts, challenging the mentoree and creating a safe learning environment that encourages the mentoree to take risks and share vulnerabilities.

This exchange helps impact those intangibles that are so critical to personal success – self-confidence, communication skills, and realistic self-assessment. In a successful diverse mentoring relationship – a majority-minority match – these qualities can be developed to an even greater degree.

The right mentoring relationship will benefit the mentor as much as the mentoree, especially in diverse matches. It will be not only personally gratifying, but also will give the mentor a new perspective of the organization and its culture. In many cases, senior managers who've served as mentors have said that the relationship has re-energized them and even revitalized their career.

Making It Work – Selection & Process Are Critical

Mentoring works best when professional matching, rather than the self-selection of mentors, occurs. With diversity mentoring, it's even more important. It's natural for individuals to connect with and seek out people who are similar to themselves, so if given the chance to select a mentor, they'll often choose someone similar. This situation usually fails to produce the environment necessary for a transformational relationship to form.

Using a proven process that involves completing questionnaires and being interviewed by a dedicated mentoring professional, however, yields better mentoring matches. People can be paired based on their experience, style, and goals – as well as on the company's objectives for the mentoring program. If promoting diversity is a goal, pairs can be created and nurtured as a way to support it. The individuals win, and the organization wins.

Mentoring is about creating and nurturing a transformational relationship that changes both individuals. But it won't work unless both people seize the opportunity to learn from each other. It's critical to create a safe environment where both individuals feel safe enough to honestly address the tough topics related to diversity – the obstacles, fears, prejudices, challenges, misconceptions, etc. This is where mentoring training and an understanding of the mentoring process become important.

Current discrimination laws have created a chilling effect on many people in the workplace. Many individuals fear they will be accused of being racist or sexist if they say certain things. That's why mentoring training is so important. Before they are matched, everyone hears the same message and receives permission to tackle diversity issues within the safety of the mentoring relationship. Training also helps mentors to take the lead and encourage honest conversations with their mentorees.

Focused on building a safe relationship with boundaries that are negotiated by both parties, mentoring training teaches both mentors and mentorees how to behave in the relationship. Mentorees drive the relationship, for example, and are responsible for bringing the content to the conversations. The mentor's role is to create the safe environment, take an active role in the process and welcome potential discussions of sensitive issues.

Mentoring training also gives people permission *not* to have the tough conversations if they feel uncomfortable or unwilling. While the mentor communicates that the relationship is safe and that there will be no consequences for feelings shared, the relationship remains mentoree driven. The mentoree always decides on the content of the conversations.

When both individuals become engaged and feel safe in the mentoring process, they can confront their own blind spots and prejudices openly and see what they need to change. It's common for a white male, for example, to mentor a woman and gain a greater understanding of how his wife feels, and why she feels a certain way. It's also common for individuals who are paired with someone of a similar race or gender to make an incorrect assumption about the person based on their shared demographic. The person quickly learns the importance of not projecting their feelings onto someone else who he assumes shares them.

Mentoring allows people to take the theories learned in diversity trainings into the workplace. They practice what they learn because they're being challenged regularly within their mentoring relationships and they know that any prejudices they have will show up.

Finally, it's important for a company to show commitment to any mentoring program it sets up. Ongoing training, the gathering of participant feedback and internal follow-up are key components in keeping a mentoring program on track to produce desired results. Without a visible, ongoing commitment from the company, mentoring and diversity programs are seen as token gestures.

Management Mentors is a mentoring training and consulting firm that has found a 90% success rate with pairs it matches using a thoughtful, proven process. For more information on how your company can achieve greater success through mentoring, contact us at (617) 789-4622 or visit us at www.management-mentors.com.