The Value of Diversity

By Kim Olver

What is the value of equal opportunity? Read one woman's opinion about why diversity in the workplace is more essential than ever, and why businesses should strive to remove barriers.

I know that diversity has been a big topic of conversation ever since the early 1990s when research supported the demographics that by the year 2000, 85% of the entering workforce would be female, African-American, Asian-American, Latino, or new immigrants. The fact that white males would be a minority entering the workplace was a wake-up call for corporate America.

How have we done since then? I suggest that there has been definite improvement in the area of hiring but it seems that once women and minorities are hired, there are informal, relatively unconscious systems in place that prevent advancement of the minority worker or women, even today.

If there is to be a true advancement in the area of valuing diversity, then the system must be revised so that there truly is equal opportunity for advancement for everyone, including the white male. I am not advocating for a system that promotes workers who are incompetent to meet some type of quote system.

What I am suggesting is that management begins to closely examine the formal and informal systems that are in place that prevent advancement by women and minorities. Of course this is a monumental task and many would like to believe that it is unnecessary---that there is no problem here. That is part of the problem. On the surface, it seems that things or improving, however, under close scrutiny there are many flaws.

Why would a company make a commitment to this self-introspection? Wouldn't it make things worse before they got better? The answer to the second question is quite possibly yes. The answer to the first question is bottom line dollars and cents, as well as the fact that it is the humanitarian thing to do.

America is a multicultural nation that is becoming more multicultural daily. That is a reality. Unless a company intends to market and sell to only mainstream America, the contributions of minorities and women in the workplace are invaluable. This does not even begin to touch on the advantages of diversity for the global market!

Addressing the diversity issue is a three-part situation. The first step is what I call Awareness. This is a time for individual self-reflection for each member of the workforce. There are many skilled training programs available that are designed to raise the awareness of the individual. If this step is missed, then taking the next two steps will be ineffective.

Individuals must develop a certain amount of empathy and understanding for the experience of being a minority in the country. With this empathy and understanding, a new motivation will
develop to learn more and to be in tune with the needs of female and minority workers on the job. Even those who believe that they are aware and knowledgeable will be surprised at how much they really don't know.

The second step involves honoring, respecting and valuing the diversity of each individual. Diversity is so much more than race and ethnicity. It has been defined as a total way of life and is learned. Take a white person and have him raised by African-American parents, and his culture will be that of African-American. Conversely, a black child raised by Caucasian parents will have a Caucasian culture.

When difference is truly honored, respected and valued, no longer are people concerned about who is right and who is wrong. There is a place for everything and no one is wrong. What works best in one situation may not work best in another. Everyone’s opinion is valued. Instead of shutting down when differing views are expressed, the new paradigm is to listen for the wisdom in the difference and the means to incorporate it into the way things are currently done for the good of all.

The final, and perhaps the most difficult, stage is to examine the systems that are already in place. One of the systems that has continually been blamed is that to get along in the world of work, women and minorities need to "act" like white males. It is this acculturation that will currently get a person ahead. This is fine in the short run for the company, however, in the long run, when embracing difference, having workers who are comfortable with their own culture and can bring with them the advantages and benefits from that culture into the workplace is invaluable. Also, setting it up so minorities and females realize that they must acculturate on the job is not a good thing for the worker. People want to be their authentic selves in all situations and why shouldn't they be permitted to be that unless it interferes with the quality of the products or services produced?

There are several other systems in place of which most in management are completely unaware. It generally takes a consultant from outside the system to come in and do a complete analysis of what is working and what is not. Once the areas for improvement have been identified, then the real work begins!

There are some companies in America who have been working on workplace diversity for years and are still striving for higher levels. To truly be committed to the process is probably a lifetime commitment. Diversity appreciation is more of a journey than a destination.

Kim Olver has over 20 years experience in staff development and supervision and is an expert in leadership skills, staff relationships and diversity. Certified in reality therapy/choice theory/lead management/quality school concepts, she works with counselors, schools and businesses to apply these ideas. Visit http://www.leveragingdiversityatwork.com

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