

Addressing Importance of Diversity Training

A recent conversation with a colleague at the National Speakers Association annual convention in New Orleans led to the writing of this article. This particular colleague asked me three very specific questions about my area of expertise. The fact that this colleague asked me these questions led me to believe many other people in the business world probably have the same question.

Why do we need to have workshops about diversity? The demographics of United States are shifting rapidly. The poet Walt Whitman wrote, “Here is not merely a nation but a teeming Nation of nations.” The United States is and has been a land of immigrants. What many of us have in common is that many of our ancestors came here by boat. Americans are a conglomeration of religions, races, ethnicities, cultural traditions, and socioeconomics. As the demographic changes across the country and especially in this community, businesses need to change the way they do business.

One of the ways to deal with these changes is by training. In a global economy businesses need to know how to communicate and conduct business with people from different cultures and races. Training is an investment in your people as well as an investment in the future of your business.

One of the biggest misconceptions about diversity training is that it primarily deals with the issues of race. This is far from the truth-diversity workshops address a variety; age biases, disabilities within the workplace, sexual orientation concerns, gender issues and religion. The influence of multicultural consumers is expanding in every industry. Automakers, retailers, banks, media and entertainment companies reach out to

these consumers more each day. Their bottom line increasingly reflects the success of those efforts. However, other industries have yet to make this effort.

So why do people get so defensive about issues of diversity? This is an interesting question that has as many theories as the day is long. When faced with prospect of potentially being challenged or questioned about their belief system many people become defensive. The purpose of diversity training is to introduce for some and reintroduce to others, you to your belief system, it is never about questioning or challenging that belief system.

People also ask, **“Why do I have to attend another workshop on diversity?”** My usual response to this question has remained constant-as long as people continue to treat people with malice and disrespect because of a particular group they belong to, there continues to be a need for these types of training.

The recent report by the Justice Department about the U.S. prison system speaks to this very point. As I read the report several points occurred to me, the first being the number of American adults that had been imprisoned in 2001(one out of every 37 adults). The second point that stuck out to me was the number of minorities that were incarcerated. It is both interesting and alarming that Blacks make up 12.9 percent of the U.S. population, however Black males made up 16.6 percent of the U.S. prison population in 2001. Hispanics make up 13.2 percent of the U.S. population, however Hispanic males made up 7.7 percent of the U.S. prison population in 2001.

The talking heads will cite many reason why these numbers are so high and many of the cited reasons will have validity, however, I suspect one reason these numbers are so high-and this reason will not usually be admitted by these talking heads-is the

perception that the majority of people in this country have towards these particular groups.

This is just another reason why we need to address and readdress our mental recordings about groups of people who are different from us.