

## **Why is diversity still an issue in 2004?**

As an educational consultant, my job involves traveling around the country and speaking to a variety of audiences on motivational, productivity, inspirational, leadership and team-building topics. Recently, while giving a presentation to a group of attorneys from the Bar Association of a major city in the Midwest, I was asked this question about diversity: “Why is diversity still an issue in 2004?”

The question was asked without malice intent and with a sincere desire to answer a question that I suspect had bothered this individual for quite some time.

Based on the educational level of the audience, I decided to first start off with facts. I mentioned that according to Census 2000 figures, Latinos (or Hispanics) had now surpassed African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States. Latinos with a population of 35.3 million people now comprise 13.2 percent of the total U.S. population. The Latino population increased 57 percent since 1990 compared with a total increase of 13.2 of the U.S. population.

African Americans are now the second largest ethnic group in our nation, with a total population of 34.7 million people. They make up 12.9 percent of the U.S. population.

Asian Americans are the third largest minority group in the United States, with 11.9 million people, according to Census 2000 data. They make up 3.6 percent of the U.S. population.

The total number of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender (GLBT) people in the United States is estimated to be between 13 million and 17 million, according to major

studies. Depending on the source, the percentage of GLBT people in this country ranges from 3 percent to 10 percent of the total U.S. population.

A group that is often ignored is people with disabilities. This segment of our society is 54 million people strong, and consists of people of all ethnic backgrounds, cultures and ages, and represents the largest minority subgroup in the United States

“Facts are fine” was the look that I received from several audience members. This question that was on the minds of most everyone in the audience that evening was this “How do those facts affect and or apply to me?”

“Glad you asked,” was my response as I began to make a business case for diversity. Unless you have been living under a rock for the past decade, you can clearly see that the demographics of the United States are shifting rapidly.

As the white majority ages, the next and future generations increasingly will consist of people of color. This information (which was released last year by census 2000) was a shocking wake-up call for many corporations that believed diversity was a well-intentioned, soft, politically correct, human-resources project that wasn't critical to their core business or long-term financial success.

The statistic that generated the most interest-that Latinos now surpass African Americans as the largest minority segment, overshadowed an even more significant trend. Within a few years, white people will be a minority in this country. Yet corporate America continues to be run largely by white men who have not exhibited particular interest in people of color or other diverse groups, including gays/lesbians and people with disabilities.

And in their succession planning, or lack of it, corporations perpetuate leaders from the same backgrounds and mindsets as their predecessors. This failure to recognize the growing affluence and shifting demographics of emerging marketplaces and reach out to these consumers will prove costly to many companies.

If this doesn't explain why diversity still remains an issue, then I don't know what will. Businesses that stagnate and fail to grow invariably are swallowed by their competition or become obsolete and fade away. It's pretty simple: "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten."

If a business wants to succeed in this new century, it needs to connect quickly and lastingly with the marketplace. If they ignore potential customers, those customers will find other sources for their needs and that business will become irrelevant.

Light bulbs began to go off as audience members began to "get it" in terms of understanding the basic premise behind making business case for diversity.