

Business

**Mandatory diversity training may do more harm than good**

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For hospital employees of Sentara Healthcare, it starts with a required one-hour online class each year. The goal: "to deliver respectful care to people with diverse backgrounds," said Pat Evans, director of recruitment and workforce planning.

Wolseley North America, parent of the Ferguson plumbing supply firm, conducts a mandatory, four-hour, face-to-face session stressing that diversity involves educational background and military status, not just race and gender .

These companies are doing it half-right, according to research that casts a critical eye on diversity training.

About two-thirds of companies engage in diversity training, according to a 2005 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management.

Yet most corporate efforts at diversity education backfire, resulting in a more homogeneous work force, according to researchers who analyzed 30 years of data at more than 800 U.S. companies.

The trouble, they say, is that most sessions are mandatory, as opposed to voluntary, and focus on legal dangers, not the business benefits of diversity.

"They force their workers and managers to sit through this training, and they hit them in the head with the possible legal sanctions," said one of the researchers, Alexandra Kalev, an assistant sociology professor at the University of Arizona.

Kalev and Frank Dobbin, a sociology professor at Harvard University, reviewed the types of diversity training programs and the composition of the work force at the companies. They found that optional sessions are more likely to lead to increased numbers of women and minorities in the workplace.

That's because mandatory sessions might trigger resentment and unintentionally "activate biases," Kalev said. When they're voluntary, she said, employees are more likely to search for the positives to justify the use of their time.

Too many diversity training programs, she said, are designed as "a ticket out of jail" - a way to bolster a company's defense if it faces discrimination suits. Too often, Kalev said, the sessions concentrate on legal minefields.

"You have to behave this way," she said, "otherwise we will get sued and we'll have bad publicity."

That also turns off employees.

"The legal content is so boring and so intimidating," she said, "and it's usually exaggerated."

Better, she said, to focus on how diversity helps them achieve their strategic goals.

Officials from seven businesses based in Hampton Roads or with local offices were interviewed about their diversity training programs. All said they, as Kalev recommended, do not harp on legal issues . But all have some type of mandatory class; many defended it as the best approach.

"You would be remiss if you did not provide people entering the work force some kind of training that tells them what the culture should be and what we expect them to be," said David Cobbs, assistant vice president for diversity and equal employment opportunity at Norfolk Southern Corp.

About 14 percent of the company's union workers and 16 percent of the others are minorities, he said.

"I'd be afraid that if you only made it voluntary, you would miss out on some people that would need that education," Sentara's Evans said.

She said 43 percent of Sentara's employees are minorities.

Janis Sanchez, chairwoman of Old Dominion University's psychology department, regularly conducts diversity training .

"Mandatory does get everybody in the same room," she said. "I think having people who are very resistant allows us to get the topics right out there."

Kalev said, however, that it's OK if one-fifth of your employees don't attend.

"Those 20 percent are probably closed-minded, and you don't want to force them into the room," she said. "The others will convert the 20 percent or make them not count."

Kalev's warning about the dangers of getting too legal won widespread support.

At Sentara, "we're not focusing on it from the legal perspective," Evans said . "We're really talking about what's fair and what's right and how would you want to be treated."

At Wolseley, "we're trying to find a way to tie those messages to some of our strategic goals and priorities," said Wendy Whiteash, manager of diversity and inclusion.

For instance, she said, greater appreciation of diversity can lead to increased loyalty to the company and, ultimately, greater productivity.

Wolseley spokeswoman Amanda Wroten said she could not provide data on the diversity of its work force.

Ernest Hicks, manager of corporate diversity for Xerox Corp., which has a Norfolk sales office, said it's crucial that diversity seminars go beyond racial and gender differences. Xerox's even include the difference between "visionaries" and detail-oriented types.

"If everything is directed toward majority males and their lack of understanding and acceptance of women and minorities," he said, "you've given them the feeling of being singled out."

Xerox's work force is about 30 percent minority, Hicks said.

Angela Avant, a Portsmouth native who is partner in charge of diversity at KPMG, an accounting firm with an office in Norfolk, said KPMG's offerings include yearlong training for 25 senior managers and six "affinity groups" for networking and skills development for blacks, women, Hispanics, Asian Americans, gay people and people with disabilities.

"If you just say, 'Go take this mandatory course,' with nothing else around it, I'd say you're setting yourself up for failure," Avant said.

KPMG would not provide data on the racial composition of its work force.

The research on diversity training is an outgrowth of earlier work - by Kalev, Dobbin and Erin Kelly, associate professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota - assessing the value of diversity programs at corporations.

They found that diversity training and mentoring programs were less effective than actions that "establish organizational responsibility," such as writing and reviewing affirmative-action plans or creating diversity committees or executive positions.

That approach also was echoed locally.

"The top has to say, 'This is a valuable part of our mission for Old Dominion University,'

" said ReNee' Dunman, assistant to ODU's president for equal opportunity and affirmative action. "It can't be just lip service. It has to be active buy-in."

Recently, she said, ODU's top two officials, acting President John Broderick and Provost Carol Simpson, completed an online course focusing on sexual harassment, sending a message to other employees.

Minorities make up 21 percent of Old Dominion's employees, spokeswoman Jennifer Mullen said.

Kalev said her findings should not be misconstrued.

"We're not saying, 'Get rid of diversity efforts,'

" she said. "We're just saying, 'Do them right. Put someone in charge.'

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