

Leading/Valuing Diversity

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A major concern of the Air Force, as well as corporate America, is how to deal with the changing demographics of the American workforce. Based on the article titled, "New and Improved Workplace Diversity Initiatives for the Bottom Line," written by Dr. Samuel Betances and Dr. Laura M. Torres Souder, of Souder, Betances and Associates, Inc., the future is screaming at us with new demographic trends that announce a new world reality in which to do business. The changing face of America requires a positive response. Part of that response is the implementation of diversity initiatives in the workplace. For real organizational change to occur, three conditions must be met: (1) there must be dissatisfaction with the way things are; (2) there must be a vision of where the organization wants to go and a process by which to get there; and (3) insightful, visionary leaders who will embrace the challenge of change while seeking a more prosperous and profitable future.

One Air Force solution to the shifting patterns and potential problems caused by changing demographics in the American workforce is for the total force to receive instruction in understanding diversity. Now that we have downsized and rightsized the Air Force, it is imperative that we recruit, train, educate, and retain the best and brightest individuals that America has to offer.

The rapidly changing global environment in which we live and work and the challenge brought about by the realities of the future workforce are important issues for profit and nonprofit entities alike. If America is to remain competitive in the future, it is critical that we understand how to manage a diverse workforce to assist us in meeting the challenges of accelerating change and exploding technological advances. The overall impact of changing workforce demographics is that each organization, if it is to prosper, must be prepared to deal with diverse cultural values brought to the workplace. Managers must create a hospitable climate that reduces dysfunctional tensions by promoting respect and

productive teamwork. With this in mind the following four tools are presented for leading/valuing diversity:

1. The first tool essential to lead/value diversity is to form a common ground or shared set of assumptions within which we communicate. In most work situations, you will have people of different ages, race, sex, religions, personalities, and so on; however, the organization normally has a vision, goals, rules, and regulations that govern what it does based on the mission. When we don't establish a common ground for communication, we have mass confusion with everyone going in different directions.

2. After forming a common ground, we must expel stereotypes. "Younger employees are wet behind the ears, know nothing, have no respect or loyalty, lack experience, therefore have no credibility and can't be trusted with much responsibility. Older employees are less motivated to work hard, they are nothing but deadwood, resistant to change, can't learn new methods/technology, they reach a plateau after 40, should be fired after 50, and are 'fire proof.'" These are examples of age stereotypes from *Workforce America! Managing Employee Diversity as a Vital Resource* by Marilyn Loden and Judy B. Rosener. In order to manage diversity, we must increase awareness and expel stereotypes. Stereotypes ignore differences among the individuals in a group; therefore, there is no room in the workplace for stereotypes.

3. Next, we must acknowledge differences. People are different and there is no way to make them fit into a single mold; nor is there any reason to. In order to effectively manage a diverse workforce, we must acknowledge differences. (We may have differences of opinion about individuals such as Rush Limbaugh and Louis Farrakhan, but we should accept the fact that we share different views, and respect our right to have them.) We should focus more on the things we have in common.

4. Finally, we should use everyone's experience and background as a resource. Diversity of experience and background ensures diverse ways of looking at problems. Effective managing of all human resources can result in higher productivity, survival in a world of competition, improved performance, more creativity, more innovations, and reduced turnover and absenteeism. Giving emphasis to diversity without threatening our unity is the proper way we, in fact, strengthen the ties that bind us together. Communication, sensitivity, mutual respect, and common

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trust are the primary ingredients of social cohesiveness in a democratic society.

Diversity should not be used interchangeably or synonymously with equal employment opportunity (EEO) or affirmative action (AA). EEO/AA is the law based on the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VII. This body of law provides a clear-cut set of guidelines that all organizations and employers must comply with regarding objective hiring, promotion, and treatment practices. The goal of diversity is about shaping new systems, not about demeaning groups who have benefited from past imbalances. The reason is simple: diversity is a good management tool. There is nothing to be gained by poisoning relationships. The goal of leading/valuing diversity is to heal, to build, to shape new nonracist, non-sexist, nondiscriminatory systems.

In summary, managing a changing mosaic workforce requires more flexibility and more understanding than does managing a more homogeneous workforce. We have to learn the W. Edwards Deming quality principles and how to

empower our employees. We have to encourage their ideas and suggestions. We must reward outstanding performance and support the professional and personal needs of others. We are faced with a variety of management challenges based on the life experiences and socioeconomic factors of workforce members. We can be a more effective Air Force if we keep these differences in mind when we develop both short-term and long-range strategic plans. We must be cognizant that what works to motivate or reward employees of one group does not necessarily work for other groups. Organizations that understand these flexibilities and design programs to meet the needs of all their workers, as well as those of potential employees, will have a competitive advantage in recruiting and retaining the highest quality workers. We want to make the Air Force an organization where the best qualified want to work. We should promote and recognize diversity as a key component of mission success. The future will bring only more diversity and with it will come the additional need to build an Air Force culture of sustained mutual respect and understanding.