Learn to harness the full potential of a diverse workforce
By: Joe Santana

Takeaway:

You can take full advantage of the IT workforce's ever-increasing diversity by learning how to manage diversity more effectively. Here are six steps you can take to become a better diversity manager.

Certain factors, including demographic shifts and affirmative action policies, are driving diversity in the workplace. It's to your advantage as a manager to fully harness the capabilities of a diverse workforce. Here's how.

The benefits

"Companies that have managers who are equipped to successfully leverage the distinct and rich talents and skills and knowledge of all employees will not only avoid drains on profitability, they will actually attain a number of strategic benefits," says Linda Stokes, president and CEO of PRISM International, Inc. By effectively harnessing the different perspectives and talents of a diverse workforce, skilled managers help their companies to differentiate and produce results that are superior to any that could come from the collective efforts of a more homogenous group.

In fact, in recognition of the value of effectively harnessing the full capabilities of a diverse workforce by some major Fortune 500 companies in the IT consulting space, many IT managers have hired consultants, such as William Arruda, the founder of Reach, the world's first branding consultancy focused on the human side of branding. Arruda, and consultants like him, help employees identify what makes them unique or diverse relative to other team members. "Tapping into diversity is ESSENTIAL for success in the technology business," said Arruda. "Diversity breeds creativity and creativity drives innovation. To be successful in the IT business, your people need to be able to innovate so that you can remain differentiated from the competition—otherwise, your company becomes a collection of 'commoditized' people that produce 'commoditized' products and services," he added.

The bottom line is that in the IT industry, the ability to manage diversity is extremely valuable. Even in companies that are not in the IT industry, the effectiveness of IT managers in managing diverse relationships can be a powerful tool given the strategic nature of the IT function and its impact on a company's overall ability to meet its objectives.

How can managers become more effective diversity managers?
So, where do you begin? Here are six steps you can take immediately to become a better diversity manager:

1. Become more open, aware, and understanding of the viewpoints of others
Start by acknowledging your own biases. Develop an open mind to different approaches. There are many roads that lead to the same place. Many times, people will approach their work in a totally different way from what their manager deems right and yet still arrive at the same, if not better, result due to their own unique set of talents and experiences. Remember that "different" is not necessarily a bad thing.

2. Differentiate between work requirements, work impediments, and personal preferences that do not impact work
Work requirements are specific behaviors that support the goals of the business and are, therefore, needed from team members to succeed. Work impediments are behaviors that serve as obstacles to achieving the vision and goals of the team and company. Nonimpacting preferences, on the other hand, are behaviors that people may like to see in others and/or that make people feel more comfortable, but do not directly impact the achievement of business vision and goals.

3. Focus behavior standardization efforts on work requirements
Demand adherence to the behaviors that are deemed requirements for success in the workplace.

4. Reject work impediments
Any behavior that interferes with achieving the mission and vision of the company and team must be rejected.

5. Be flexible in the area of nonimpacting preferences
If a behavior does not impact the achievement of the business goal in a negative way, be open to accepting it even if it is not a behavior you would personally practice.

6. Seek to obtain the skills and tools you need to be effective in today's diverse workplace
Stokes suggests that you focus on acquiring the "skills and tools necessary to coach, interview, and address issues when they arise, and to delegate, communicate, sell, and provide customer service across a large variety of dimensions of diversity so that you can tap into the creativity and innovative ideas needed to solve the complex and unique set of challenges that your business is facing."

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, by 2010, employers will face a shortage of 10 million skilled workers. Numerous other sources show that the demographics of our workforce are shifting toward an increase in the percentage of women and people of color. Translation: As we move from the dawn of the twenty-first century toward the completion of its first decade, the ability to acquire, manage, and retain a diverse workgroup will clearly be a large factor in determining what companies move to the front

of the pack. By gaining mastery over these critical skills today, you will be in a position to help your company gain a powerful competitive edge.

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