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Choosing the Right Diversity Education Process Pays Off

By Karen Barrow, MSOD, RODP

There I sat, day three of a six-day workshop – palms sweaty, heart racing, and head throbbing – I had just taken the biggest risk of my life and was now bracing myself for reactions from the group. Several years ago, I signed up to spend a week challenging myself in a learning laboratory experience studying diversity through the NTL Institute for Applied Behavior Science in Bethel, Maine. The name of the organization itself should be enough to send most logical, analytical type persons into a tail-spin – “What? You want me to get introspective and examine my behavior?” I knew I was in for the experience of my life. Somehow around day two, I found myself imagining that bungy jumping would have been a much better way to challenge myself. It would have been over so quickly!



Laboratory learning originated at the NTL Institute, which was created in 1947. The Institute was based on the vision of its founders that individual learning, when shared “in the moment” with a group, provided the highest potential for changing behaviors. Thus, the

blending of adult learning and group dynamics was achieved and resulted in what is known today as laboratory learning. During a typical workshop, facilitators teach concepts while encouraging participants to observe themselves and others *during* the learning process, reflect, and then offer insights or feedback to the group. Over the years, this process has been refined so that it has become an acceptable way of teaching and learning in the corporate environment. Today, new applications of laboratory learning are represented in cutting edge programs in the fields of change management, leadership, team development, and diversity, throughout the world.

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Which brings me back to my sweaty palms. It was late in the afternoon and we had had a full day learning about social oppression (racism, sexism, and ageism). I was tired and found myself daydreaming about the bed and breakfast I had checked into a few days ago, with its pastel colors, feather pillows, and plump down comforter. Suddenly, I was jolted back to reality, when I heard the facilitator calling my name. He wanted to know what I thought about white people's role in sustaining institutionalized oppression. My mind was reeling as I felt defensive and began to argue, "Hey, it's not my fault that some white people did bad things in the past!" "I'm a good person and I treat everyone with respect." Then, there was that terrible silence, you know, the kind where you wish the ground would suck you up. I could hear the clock ticking, bushes scraping against a nearby window, and laughter coming from the classroom next door.

What ensued was one of the most enlightening dialogues I have ever experienced. Paying attention to our guidelines for learning, the group legitimized my reality and acknowledged my feelings of guilt and helplessness. To my surprise, several women of color reflected back to me that they understood my dilemma, while several white members echoed my feelings of guilt. Slowly, I began to *own* my learning as I publicly examined both the positive and negative aspects of being white. I began to make room for my "mistakes" and to lean into my discomfort. In a relatively short period of time, the laboratory process helped me recognize the role I played, implicitly and explicitly, as a member of the white race. My experience deepened my understanding of my attitudes, belief systems, and behavior as a consultant. It has forever affected the way in which I consult with organizations and has prompted me to do some of my own research into why so many well-intentioned diversity efforts fail or lose momentum. The balance of this article provides insight into the links between three levels of organizational change, traditional training programs, and laboratory learning processes. I will clarify for readers how to identify and align the desired level of change with the most appropriate educational model for the greatest likelihood of success.

Before I start, it will be helpful to outline the differences between learning laboratories and traditional training approaches.

Traditional Learning

Instructor directed
Past tense (curriculum already developed)

Surface, temporary change
Instructors talking at...
Short-term focus
75% Instructor speaking
Ownership for success resides with
and expertise within the instructor
Low resistance
Status quo is maintained and change
is *talked about* intellectually

Laboratory Learning

Learner directed
Present tense (topic selected, developed in-
the-moment)
Deep, permanent change
Facilitators intervening in...
Long-term focus
25% Facilitator speaking
Ownership for success resides with preparation,
participation of, and expertise within the learner
High resistance
Dis-equilibrium is created and change
is *experienced*

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It is important to note that in laboratory experiences, often thoughts and feelings are surfaced that may not be acceptable to disclose within certain business cultures. Traditional educational processes, which emphasize role-playing, scenario development, and cognitive thinking about the subject matter, may be a better fit with business cultures where thinking is valued and talking *about* events or subjects is the norm. What is interesting, however, is that research has shown traditional training processes may not create enough momentum for long-term change. *So how do you decide which learning process is best suited for your diversity goals?*

The important thing to keep in mind is to focus on what level of change you require. Then, match the learning process to your desired outcomes. This important step is often overlooked either because leaders are unaware of its relationship to successful sustainability or there is little value placed on its importance. Unfortunately, over the past decade or so, change management has become generalized to encompass “one size fits all”. This is a crucial mistake, because, without a clear definition of what level of change you want to accomplish, all change looks the same. This could offer a partial explanation of why so many change efforts fail and employees become cynical of diversity programs. To avoid this dilemma you can view change through three different lenses and levels.

First level of change - *Surviving*

The first level of diversity change is what leaders typically think about when they talk about implementing a diversity program. They recognize that the status quo is no longer acceptable and something needs to be changed. The clamor is frequently; “We need diversity training for everyone so we can become more tolerant of each others’ differences.” This level addresses continuous improvement in existing skills - skills that do not measure up to future corporate goals. To a large extent, organizational practices remain unchanged. To test for readiness at this level, leaders need to ask these questions:

- Does our need for change require an improvement in our existing way of operating?
- What skill or knowledge training do we need to achieve our end goal?
- Have we accurately communicated the need for this change throughout the organization?

If your intention is to create an awareness of how to manage a diverse workforce, or how to increase awareness of cultural differences, traditional training could be quite effective. The process allows people to be introduced to new concepts in a low risk environment. The training is generally energizing, fun, and at times thought provoking. When it’s followed up with on-going discussions between employees and managers, new awareness can be created and appreciation for differences may be heightened.

Second level of change – *Progressing*

The second level of change becomes increasingly more complex and is driven broader and deeper within the organization. Instead of simply improving the status quo, this level involves questioning the status quo and replacing it with something different. It may

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require some changes in structures, systems, and processes. That being said, for most leaders, this level of change is still seen as a project to be managed. The requirements for behavioral change are there, but tend to be lower and are somewhat more predictable, making human dynamics still quite “manageable”. To examine readiness at this level, leaders need to ask questions such as:

- Will our diversity effort require us to redesign our operations?
- Are we able to design a definitive picture of the new state?
- Do we know what level of organizational performance we want to achieve?
- Is it practical to expect this change to happen within a certain timeframe?

If your intent is to redesign diversity policies, hiring and retention procedures, and/or key leadership positions, traditional training may or may not produce the intended results. Since structural changes will require a new mindset to support them, a key success factor will be the participation of employees in designing the change process. Additionally, management and employees will need to interact extensively during the training or laboratory event so that issues can be resolved together and strategies for transferring new mindsets in the workplace can be transformed. All plans and follow-up processes need to be aligned with corporate diversity goals. Here – one size does not fit all and highly customized traditional training or laboratory experiences are suggested. Furthermore, educational models may look different from department to department or work group to work group, depending on each sub-culture’s readiness for change and capacity to adapt.

Third level of change – *Emerging*

The third level of change is considered transformative. It may best be viewed as a radical departure in operating. This level of change is so significant that it requires a change in members’ mindsets, values, and behavior. Examples of the pressures that typically bring about this type of breakthrough are significant losses of market share, morale, or productivity, also, severe cuts in funding sources, higher than industry turnover, or litigation as it relates to discrimination. Moreover, at this level, the end state is largely ambiguous and emerges as a product of the change effort itself. The realization for leaders and members is that the world, their customers, and employees are changing. In other words the organization is faced with some disconfirming information about their operations. Essentially, they understand that they must do things differently no matter how successful they have been in the past. Leaders must address these questions:

- Are we ready to change even if the destination is unclear?
- Will this change require significant changes in stakeholders, structures, systems, and strategies, to meet the needs of a changing world?
- Will this change require significant shifts in our shared assumptions about how we think, behave, and lead our organization?

If the answers to these questions are yes, and if creation of an inclusive culture is part of your overall change strategy then you would certainly benefit from a learning laboratory

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experience. One of the most helpful mechanisms that laboratory experiences produce is a change in the organization's norms of communication - how members think and speak about themselves, their peers, and managers. Leaders begin to examine the underlying assumptions and myths they hold about the nature of organizational work, assumptions about people and their motivations, and assumptions about management practices. Specifically, new competencies include the ability to make visible some personal filters that tend to distort what people see and how they react to others who are different. Also, there is an increased awareness of the many forces that shape even the simplest messages. All of these new competencies help leaders and members eventually evolve an organization that is consistent with new self-images.

Learning about self and others requires effort. Transforming organizations from monocultural to multicultural also requires effort. To be effective requires a sense of clarity about where you intend to take your organization, commitment to examine your own thought process, and an organizational community willing to accept that there are other ways to view the world. No matter what level of change you choose, my experience has shown that your success will be compounded over time when you align your goals with your educational processes. As an Organization Development consultant, I recognize that the greatest gift the laboratory experience has given me is the ability to fully use myself as an instrument of change for and with my client system. That gift has been returned to me many times as I watch my clients become agents of change and increase their strength to challenge the status quo.

Karen Barrow, MSOD, RODP
President, Baybridge Consulting
Rochester, NY
585-218-4024 phone
585-218-4036 fax
www.baybridge-consulting.com

Karen P. Barrow, MS, RODP is President of Baybridge Consulting and is an Organization Development practitioner who facilitates team, culture, and strategic change for profit and non-profit organizations. She received her Masters in Organization Development from American University and is among the 2% of consultants nationally who are registered and accredited to practice Organization Development.

Prior to starting her business, Karen spent 26 years at Kodak as an internal consultant working with leaders on global change strategies and leading diversity and inclusion initiatives. Since then, she has worked with many organizations both locally and nationally to create the conditions necessary for change. She is also a frequent contributor to the Rochester Business Journal and is also an adjunct faculty member at Nazareth College teaching Organizational Psychology.