

Workforce Diversity Network

What Kind of Diversity Training Really Works?

By Gregg Ward, CMC

There are all kinds of diversity training methods out there: lectures, slideshows, videos, interactive games, online learning, role-play, group hugs, you name it. So, how the heck do you know which ones are any good and which ones will be right for your company?



You could rely on the recommendations of professional organizations like SHRM (the Society of Human Resource Management) or big money diversity consulting/training organizations. But, I would argue that they will strongly recommend their own in-house programs, rather than what will really make a difference in your company's training room. (A quick disclaimer - I too am biased because I'm a trainer who specializes in using live, professional theater as a diversity training tool. I'm convinced this methodology is the most powerful and effective methodology available - bar none.)

But, if we were to set some standards for corporate diversity training, what would they be? Here are *Ten Expectations of a Good Diversity Training Program*.

1. **The Business Case:** any good diversity training program has got to make the "business case" for why diversity is good for the company. There are plenty of programs out there that talk about diversity from the moral and politically correct point of view; far fewer make a solid business case for how diversity is directly linked to the bottom line.

2. **Diversity Defined Broadly:** if a diversity training program is still focusing on race and gender differences - although these are very important - then it is out of date. Diversity includes all kinds of uniqueness and differences, not just race and gender.

3. **Powerful Impact:** the program must touch the participant in a deep way. Diversity is a highly "loaded" topic and people come to it with all sorts of biases and pre-conceptions. A good diversity program will challenge participants' assumptions and biases and cause them to be introspective. The way to do this is to get through someone's intellect and into their heart, where

they really live. If you can touch them there, you can generate a dialogue which can be extremely powerful.

4. **Blame Free:** the program must not blame straight white men for all the evils of the world. White guys walk into diversity training ready to be attacked and so are very defensive. A good diversity program will put diversity into perspective and help them see that they are not the enemy; that they too are just as diverse and play a role in valuing and leveraging diversity.

5. **Occasionally Humorous:** Obviously, diversity is a serious, loaded subject. Some diversity programs - especially those relating to affirmative action and quotas, etc - can be so serious and suffocating the participants just shut down and tune out. A good facilitator/trainer will be able to use humor to lighten the mood occasionally and do it so that no one is offended.

6. **Realistic.** Everyone hates a training program that is divorced from reality; like the diversity program that avoids any discussion of the likelihood that 95% of the members of the Board of Directors of your company are straight, white males. You can't do diversity training without stating "what is so" in your organization. If you try, people will dismiss it as irrelevant and a waste of time and money. If leadership doesn't want you to talk about certain "touchy subjects" in your diversity training; you might as well just cancel the training and save your money.

7. **Sparks An Ongoing Dialogue.** Diversity training is not an end unto itself, a box to be checked off once it's done. Instead, it should be a beginning of a powerful internal dialogue within your company and lead everyone toward new perspectives, actions and initiatives. I believe the study and practice of diversity management goes on throughout one's life and career - it never ends.

8. **Suits the Audience and Raises the Bar.** A diversity training program for a seasoned group of HR professionals should look and feel radically different than one for line employees in a warehouse. The program should not be "dumbed down" but instead should lift its audience up to new levels of awareness about the issue.

9. **Engages the Audience.** We are all saturated with images from the TV every day. Any diversity program of value will consist of more than a lecture by an expert. It will be engaging on many levels of learning; it will be interactive, allowing the audience to participate, ask questions, engage in activities and discussion; it will leave room for dissent and debate.

10. **Leaves You In A Different Place.** Perhaps most importantly, when they come out of a diversity program, your audience should be in a different place in terms of attitude and understanding of diversity. If not, you've wasted your time and money.

Gregg Ward, CMC is the acknowledged national expert in the use of live, professional theater, interactive facilitation and experiential learning as diversity training tools. His clients include Bristol-Myers Squibb, Kraft Foods and Qualcomm. He is also the author of the best-selling business book *Bad Behavior, People Problems & Sticky Situations: a toolbox for managers*.