Guest Editorial

Why Diversity Isn't So Plain

As a leader; one must sometimes take actions that are unpopular.[1]

—Nelson Mandela

What is diversity and why is there so much talk about it? While the definition of diversity, the condition of being different, is plain and simple, studies suggest that diversity often is misunderstood in the corridors and by the water fountains of some workplaces. Many individuals do not understand that diversity is the management of an organization's system and cultures to ensure that all employees are given the opportunity to contribute. The term *diversity* is often reduced to a simplistic euphemism for issues related to minority-majority relations. Diversity is a complex issue and should be understood in its many dimensions and from all perspectives.

One of the key features of an effective diversity program is the clear and unequivocal support of senior management as exemplified by this anecdote about a CEO:

Ernest H. Drew, the amiable CEO of Hoechst, Celanese, the chemical giant, remembers exactly when he became an advocate of a more diverse work force. He was attending a 1990 conference for Hoechst's top 125 officers, mostly white men, who were joined by fifty or so lower-level women and minorities. The group split into problem-solving teams, some mixed by race and sex, others all white and male. The main issue was how the corporate culture affected the business and what changes might be made to improve results. When the teams presented their findings, a light clicked on for Drew. "It was obvious that the diverse teams had the broader solutions," he recalls.

"They had ideas I had not even thought of. For the first time we realized that diversity is a strength as it relates to problem solving. Before, we just thought of diversity as the total number of minorities and women in the company, like affirmative action. Now we knew we needed diversity at every level of the company where decisions are made."[2]

Some top managers fail to understand, to provide strong support, or to communicate effectively to all employees what diversity means. Managers at all levels must learn to value, rather than merely tolerate, diversity by making more than a feeble effort to synthesize an increasingly diverse workforce. Cosmetic validation is not sufficient. We must recognize that most truly innovative ideas on diversity emerge from managers willing to defy the conventional approach and transform the workplace.

Some libraries have diversity management programs on the books but these programs often are not fully implemented because of a lack of care and sensitivity. Managing diversity is a comprehensive process for developing an environment that works for all employees. Diversity programs work much better and the results are enhanced significantly when the program is connected strategically to the human resource plan as well as to the top management or strategic plan. Top library management and the human resource department should be involved in diversity and clearly articulate and discuss with employees throughout the library what diversity represents. The network that lubricates the careers of white males is not always available to women and minorities. A sense of

inclusion of all employees must be apparent and there must be clear evidence that all members of the workforce are given the opportunity to make a significant contribution to the organization. By promoting multicultural interaction, libraries are assured of survival, productivity, and prosperity.

Diversity should enhance individual contributions to the organization. There should be a sense of inclusion of all employees by management. The whole point of managing diversity is to draw on the uniqueness of each employee. This enhancement is more likely to be realized when more women, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, people with disabilities, and older workers are hired.

Diversity management involves three main components: managing diversity, valuing differences, and affirmative action. The first refers to focusing on and addressing the various needs of a diverse workforce while the second refers to recognizing the interpersonal qualities that affect coworkers' relations. Awareness and sensitivity training can assist in encouraging understanding and tolerance within an organization. Affirmative action refers to focusing on the legal requirements regarding recruitment and promotions. Attention to these three components should result in enhanced teamwork within a diversified workforce. Diversity should be treated as a sound business issue and not a psychological and anthropological concern. Diversity is pursued in an organization for the purpose of removing barriers to production, service, and creativity. It is important for people from different cultures to learn to work harmoniously to meet the organization's goals. There should be a balance in ethnic and gender representation in the workforce. The real purpose of diversity is to educate people to overcome ignorance and fear of other cultures.

Visionary managers who are totally committed to diversity can further enhance their understanding and commitment by serving on a board, committee, or commission as the only one of their race or group. Managers can seek out social and professional opportunities where their presence will add diversity to the group or organization. In situations like these, leaders can see diversity as a rich source of opportunity that needs to be mined. It is crucially important for people from different cultures to learn to work harmoniously to meet organization goals. The first step in this process is to respect individuals from other cultures. Cultural differences can provide managers with different perspectives from which to approach problems. Some academic studies confirm that heterogeneous working groups view situations from a broader range of perspectives and produce more innovative solutions to problems and enhance performance.

Libraries and other organizations must understand that diversity is an important issue and should be an integral part of every organization. Top library managers must deal trenchantly with diversity in order to signal its importance to senior and middle managers. Developing a diverse staff means recruiting, hiring, and retaining qualified individuals. This means hiring the highest-quality people and harnessing the very best talents available.

In view of the fact that the United States workforce is becoming increasingly diverse, it behooves managers to create a workplace environment in which workers of various cultural backgrounds and both genders will flourish. A diverse workforce is not a choice for any library, it is a must. While diversity may offer unparalleled challenges, it will also provide wonderful opportunities for excellence and quality.

EMMA BRADFORD PERRY
Southern University Library
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

REFERENCES

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2. Faye Rice, "How to Make Diversity Pay," *Fortune* 130, no. 3 (Aug. 1994): 79.