

DIVERSITY AND MULTICULTURALISM

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Summary

Diversity is a term widely used and often misunderstood because it is layered with multiple meanings that have evolved in human resource development practice over the past 40 years. The message of diversity today extends beyond achieving inclusiveness and equality of opportunity to learning how to manage a diverse workforce for competitive advantage.

1. Introduction to the Concept of Diversity

The term "diversity" originates from the word diverse, meaning different or dissimilar. Originally, diversity referred to those who were different from a white, male norm. The first thrust of diversity efforts to ensure equal opportunities in organizations was targeted specifically to address racial and gender discrimination. Gradually, by popular use, the term began to refer not only to white women and men and women of color, but people of other nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, and sexual orientation, as well.

Diversity is a societal concept with significant organizational implications. For more than 40 years, diversity initiatives in U.S. organizations have included policies, practices, and training efforts specifically designed to minimize discrimination and provide equal opportunities for all workers regardless of race, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, age, and a host of other differences that characterize people as individuals. Today, many scholars as well as human resource development practitioners

have broadened the concept of diversity to include an even wider range of individual differences, as exemplified in this definition offered by Griggs (1995):

Not only does diversity include differences in age, race, gender, physical ability, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic class, education, region of origin, language, and so forth but also differences in life experience, position in the family, personality, job function, rank within a hierarchy, and other such characteristics that go into forming an individual's perspective. Within organizations, diversity encompasses every individual difference that affects a task or relationship. Diversity also has an impact on the products and services developed by its workforce as well as on personal, interpersonal, and organizational activities.

This all-encompassing contemporary definition of diversity has led many to confuse the term "diversity" with two closely related concepts, multiculturalism and cultural diversity. Many HRD practitioners who work with organizations to implement diversity initiatives believe that confusion among these terms has diminished the original intent of diversity efforts to focus specifically on racial and gender discrimination.

In the United States, principles of equality and equal opportunity coupled with a focus on the importance of the individual are foundational to diversity efforts in organizations. The value system that upholds equality as a standard worth achieving is distinctly Western in origin; it is deeply embedded in the thoughts and actions of many Western nations including the U.S., Canada, northern Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and others whose societies emphasize the importance of individual rights. For many non-Western countries, however, where an individual focus is replaced by an emphasis on the importance of the collective or group, acceptance of hierarchical and status differences results in greater tolerance for inequalities among individuals. Among the value differences that Marquardt suggests result in different approaches to leadership, learning, communications, and work are these:

Western Qualities

Individualism
 Achievement
 Equality/Egalitarian
 Winning
 Guilt (internal self-control)
 Pride
 Respect for Results
 Respect for Competence
 Time is money
 Action/doing
 Systematic/mechanistic
 Tasks
 Informal
 Directness/assertiveness
 Future/change
 Control
 Specific/linear
 Verbal

Non-Western Qualities

Collectivism/Group
 Modesty
 Hierarchy
 Collaboration/Harmony
 Shame (external control)
 Saving Face
 Respect for Status
 Respect for Elders
 Time is life
 Being/acceptance
 Humanistic
 Relationships/loyalty
 Formal
 Indirectness
 Past/tradition
 Fate
 Holistic
 Non-verbal

It is useful to appreciate, then, that diversity as an organizational imperative has specific meaning in a Western context that it does not necessarily imply in many non-Western countries. What is helpful to understand from an international perspective is the nature of *cultural diversity* and the organizational implications of multiple cultures.

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Biographical Sketch

Teresa J. (Terry) Carter is president of Executive Learning Strategies, Inc., an independent management consulting firm. She has a doctorate in Executive Leadership in Human Resource

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Terry Carter has worked with managers on issues of organizational change, leadership development, strategic planning, and team development for more than twelve years. Her research interests include transformative learning, strategic planning, leadership, and organizational culture. She has written about and made presentations at academic conferences on the topic of workplace learning through developmental relationships.

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