Creating a Successful Diversity Action Plan

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Diversity Represents Opportunity

Diversity is not just another fad. Our nation's demographics are changing, and our educational institutions face a growing number of pressing diversity issues. We can deny that these issues exist and oppose the necessary changes, or welcome this opportunity for growth.

Diversity is not about condemning white males, giving unfair advantages to special groups, or implementing mandatory programs as a cosmetic response to discrimination complaints. Rather, it's about creating a respectful and inclusive environment where everyone feels welcome and can make a valuable contribution. It means removing obstacles to advancement for qualified people of diverse backgrounds. It results in improved morale, decreased absenteeism and turnover, greater creativity, and increased productivity through the utilization of diverse talents, experiences and perspectives. It's a responsibility that belongs not just to the human resource department, but to all of us.

Essential Components of a Successful Diversity Plan

1. Committed leadership from within the organization.
2. A clear vision of where we want to be, with a good idea of where we are now.
3. Specific, phased and measurable goals with a step-by-step plan for achieving them.
4. A knowledgeable team in charge of developing, communicating and implementing the plan.
5. A timely implementation strategy with benchmarks for measuring progress.
6. A learning community to provide networking, sharing of best practices, and ongoing support.

In addition to the creation of organizational structures that promote equity and that support sustainable positive change, an effective diversity plan may include systematic staff training that combines personal awareness with practical knowledge and skills. Rather than asking the diversity team to implement a series of directives from above, a grassroots approach increases buy-in by empowering teams to design and implement their own agendas for change.

Committed Leadership

An effective diversity plan needs one or more leaders from within the organization who are committed for the short, medium and long term. These are not just the check signers, but the cheerleaders and champions of the diversity effort. They should be out in front, accessible, asking the hard questions, and holding people accountable.

Recognizing Diversity Issues

A diversity issue exists when any policy, practice or structure has a disproportionate impact on a particular group. For example, are women and people of color largely absent from administrative positions? Are certain groups of students over- or underrepresented in special education, remedial or gifted programs? Are there disproportionate levels of academic achievement, discipline referrals, suspensions or expulsions for certain groups, and if so, why? Perceptions are also important. Do staff, students, community members and prospective hires see your school, district or university as an inclusive organization? Issues must first be identified in order to address them effectively.

Identifying Needs

A needs assessment can provide concrete direction for a long-range diversity plan and establish a baseline from which to measure future progress. Data can be gathered through personal interviews, surveys and focus groups. Asking each group the same questions allows for comparison of results. Look for patterns. There may be differing responses among schools, between teachers and students, males and females, or by those from different income levels or ethnic backgrounds. The Unity-Works School Climate Survey can be a useful assessment tool.

Sample Diversity Goals

1. Develop an inclusive vision and mission statement for our organization.
2. Create a respectful, welcoming and inclusive campus culture.
3. Diversify campus leadership, advisory boards and mid-level management.
4. Recruit and retain a diverse workforce and provide systematic diversity training.
5. Recruit and retain a diverse student body.
6. Incorporate multicultural and global perspectives into the curriculum.
7. Practice culturally responsive, anti-bias teaching in all subjects and departments.
8. Increase graduation rates for underrepresented and underserved groups.
9. Reduce disproportionate discipline referrals, suspensions and expulsions.
10. Forge strategic diversity partnerships with alumni, local businesses and the community.

Communicating the Plan

Once your organization has adopted a diversity plan, it should be shared with all stakeholders on an ongoing basis. For example, in a K-12 setting, the plan can be included on a district web site and on school bulletin boards. It can be communicated to students during an all-school assembly. Information can be sent home to parents, and a short video can be played during open houses and parent-teacher conferences. A brochure can be developed for new employees and reviewed during staff meetings.

In a college or university setting, the goals can be publicized to prospective students, staff and faculty, and used to build internal culture as well as external awareness among alumni, donors and the wider community. This effort can be part of an integrated marketing and communications plan utilizing displays, websites, social media, direct mail, print publications, information tables, bus posters, reader boards, sponsorships, radio and TV advertising, and other means.

Implementing the Plan

Translating vision into action requires persistence, encouragement and a commitment to learning and improvement. It is often better to begin with small steps and to grow organically through an ongoing process of consultation, action and reflection.

At its first meeting, for example, the diversity team might draft a long-range organizational vision and identify one or more priorities for the next 3-6 months. In setting its initial goals, the team will want to prepare a timeline of activities and decide who will carry them out. They should also take into account the perspectives of and potential impact on various stakeholders, challenges and opportunities, spheres of greatest influence, and available human and material resources. The materials included with this packet can serve as useful tools for creating an effective organizational plan.