

## **Diversity Training Since 9/11**

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 had a profound effect on diversity training in the United States. If anything positive can be gleaned from the tragedy of that day it is the fact that managers are much more concerned about the impact that culture has on their workforces.

On the downside, many people are now afraid to even discuss differences during diversity training for fear of offending others so cultural misunderstandings in the workplace continue to have a negative impact on productivity and profitability.

These are the five major impacts that September 11<sup>th</sup> has had on diversity training:

- 1) Many companies have increased their budgets for diversity training, especially for employees being transferred overseas. The number of companies providing cross-cultural preparation grew from 57 percent in 2000 to 69 percent in 2001, according to GMAC Global Relocation Services. Specifically in understanding the Middle Eastern culture that differs dramatically from the American culture in that people from that region tend to prefer very strong eye contact, stand uncomfortably close when conversing and are very emphatic when communicating. These cultural traits have tended to give Middle Easterners a reputation as “aggressive” when viewed by Americans.
- 2) Many companies have slashed travel budgets for all types of training and conventions due to the slow economy and fear of airline travel. As a result, more are contracting for diversity training onsite.
- 3) Some companies have become aware that culture can impact learning styles and that not everyone is comfortable obtaining information through lectures. They are trying to incorporate “multimodal” presentation techniques into diversity training which can reach not only auditory learners but visual as well as kinesthetic students as well.
- 4) Diversity training has become much more tied to overall profitability than just to retention. The main reason companies have for hiring multicultural workers is to increase the bottom line. This shift is one of the reasons for increased spending on diversity training.
- 5) Diversity training has become increasingly separated from liability reduction efforts. This has helped the former be viewed by everyone in the company in a

much more positive light than simply another way to prevent racial discrimination charges.

Prior to 9/11, diversity training had already evolved from the finger-pointing and blaming of the 1970's and 80's to a more positive embracing of differences in the 1990's to the new millennium where companies started to proactively seek out people from diverse cultures. Businesses in America began to see the potential benefits multicultural workers could provide such as increased productivity, language skills, global perspective, negotiation skills, new ideas, and creative solution to difficult problems. At the turn of this century progressive companies endeavored to harness the power of multiethnic Americans as a new secret weapon against international as well as domestic competition.

Today, the majority of diversity training is primarily focused on helping businesses understand people's differences so they can work together as a team. In addition, companies who have customers from diverse culture are showing interest in learning how to sell more products and services to this group.

The current shortage of workers in the U.S. has many companies here actively seeking workers from overseas. Unfortunately, the cultural differences of these employees are rarely addressed until it's too late. If any awareness training is provided at all, most is usually focused on helping European American workers understand differences in personal space, eye contact, hygiene, gestures and communication style. Unfortunately, little is being done to assist new immigrants in understanding the unique aspects of the American culture such as our obsession with time, individualistic attitudes and capitalistic ideas.

Progressive organizations want to understand how to customize products and services to meet the unique needs of people from diverse cultures so they can increase sales to the fastest-growing consumer group in America. Minorities today buy over \$1 trillion worth of products and services annually. For example, the author regularly conducts training programs in the automobile, finance, real estate and construction industries on how to sell more of their products to Asians, Hispanics, Middle Easterners, Europeans and African Americans.

Sensitivity training for prospective overseas workers has generally been the main focus of many companies in helping prepare their employees for overseas assignments. Most of the emphasis has been on avoiding offense to others and personal safety as opposed to really understanding the people among whom workers are going to live.

Liability reduction programs are another prime driver of diversity initiatives in companies today. To avoid discrimination complaints some companies seek to actively hire multiethnic workers and purchase from minority small businesses. Others simply remind employees not to tell racially-biased jokes. Diversity training is still being provided by

many companies as a means of developing an *affirmative defense* against discrimination complaints.

Unfortunately, the author finds he is usually only brought in to do coaching of top executives after one or more discrimination complaints have been filed. You cannot imagine the stress of trying to help angry managers who only see you as a threat. It's very difficult to make lasting changes under these circumstances.

The tragedy of September 11, 2001 certainly heightened sensitivities about cultural differences. Our company used to have to devote large amounts of training on the differences between Eastern Indians and Pakistanis or the fact that Asians are from seventeen major distinct cultures and should not be lumped together into one single group. After 9/11 we have observed both managers and workers are trying to be more sensitive to all cultural differences.

Unfortunately, most diversity initiatives we have observed are mostly unsupported by top management except for lip service. Managers encourage various training and celebratory activities but never attend themselves. What does this say to culturally diverse workers? Many companies celebrate the various designated ethnic months with culturally unique food and dancing. While admirable, ethnic entertainment and delicious food does not begin to answer many of the challenges that people from different cultures bring into the workplace.

The progression of diversity training usually begins with cultural awareness training and moves to celebration of diversity. The next plateau is diversity initiatives including development of cultural employee networks and building multicultural teams to increase productivity. Companies that have diverse customers learn to customize their marketing, presentations and products to meet the unique needs of their consumers. Finally is the full inclusion of minorities into every strata of the organization so that culture no longer becomes an issue.

Since 9/11 managers are much more aware of the necessity of diversity training. We try to help them see the benefits that can be reaped from having a fully-integrated workforce. Can more be done to reduce the tension in our companies that results from people with very different backgrounds all find themselves working together. Certainly! Will more be done to help everyone get past differences? That's up to you.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Michael D. Lee, MBA, CSP, speaks around the world on how to bridge cultural differences between people. He is the author of a series of books on culture and marketing. Michael is the first Asian American to earn the Certified Speaking Professional designation in the history of the National Speakers Association.

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