

# Building Diversity in Organizations

by Tyra B. Sidberry

*A well-established human service organization was worried about the lack of diversity at its top levels. For several years, it had worked successfully to offer more diverse programming and attract more ethnically diverse clients. There was even good progress with staff diversity. However, when questioned about the lack of diversity on the board (the seat of influence and power) the executive director responded, “Well, we tried. We had one woman of color who was great. But her house burned down and she moved away.”*

Diversity work is never done.

Issues of diversity range from the obvious—the range of people present at various levels—to the more subtle—the assumptions held by those people as they approach a community or a work issue. This work is difficult partly because much of it eludes immediate identification. Even when we make the commitment and agree to address issues, we often have no idea about the depth of self-examination and work required to effect and sustain change. The work, in a sense, needs to evolve over time as we evolve.

The result of successful diversity work is often far-reaching—as organizations reflect internally they identify other organizational processes that need improvement (see Guinier and WGBH articles, pages 12 and 34). It helps us to be more analytical and creative in general.

For the past 12 years, the Diversity Initiative (DI) has supported 70 organizations that are committed to creating greater racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity within their staff and boards. As its director for the past nine years, I have had a wealth of vital, challenging and rewarding

experiences. A collaboration of Boston area funders, the Diversity Initiative evolved from observation and research conducted over a three-year period. The research showed that lack of diversity within nonprofit organizations had a profound impact on the effectiveness of their services and program delivery.

It is with admiration and in gratitude to the intelligence contributed to the DI through the hard work of many others that I share some reflections about this sometimes difficult and painful but always worthwhile work.

Each time we greet a new group of grantee organizations, we are struck by their nervous enthusiasm to get started. I try to temper their expectations by saying, “*This work will not come to fruition in your lifetime.*” Many of us are type-A personalities and expect to accomplish all our undertakings. But this work never ends; so we must take our satisfaction in the successes along the way. I also tell those facilitating this work to realize early on that the work is not just about changing individuals but about changing infrastructure and systems within an organization. The work belongs to the whole organization—board, staff, and constituents. With such a range of people, you’ll find variation in how people process information, particularly their biases. Patience and flexibility go a long way in finding fulfillment in this work.

## Facing the Music

Given that most nonprofits operate within a dominant culture psyche, years can pass by before diversity problems begin to appear in the sightline of organizational leaders if they are also a part of that culture.

While problems may be obvious to others in the organization who are not part of the dominant culture, pressures to conform may be so strong (although often subtle) that issues may remain unacknowledged for years.

However, organizations that routinely review their mission, programs and constituents will usually uncover problems in the course of planning. Sometimes it appears as a question of financial viability in terms of their relevancy to their market, sometimes simply in terms of effectiveness or credibility within the communities they serve—whatever the case, many organizations realize they risk extinction if they do not become more inclusive.

At other times, the means of recognition is unrest among the staff about human resources policies *and* practice. If these are not clearly defined, equity and parity suspicions arise. Discrimination lawsuits may become a means of communication.

## Leadership

The single most important factor affecting the success and endurance of diversity work is leadership. The organization's executive director must be the visible leader and spokesperson for achieving diversity with the full endorsement of the board and active participation by its members. Without obvious and consistent commitment on the part of the executive director and implementation by the management team, all efforts will be short-lived. Executive directors who are successful at diversity change work create a safe environment, encouraging candor and nurturing commitment to diversity throughout the organization. Sometimes this means leading the charge; at other times it means allowing others in the organization (staff and board) to lead and facilitate. Successful executive directors have been conscious of their own behaviors and responded decisively when new situations arose—however unpleasant—making sure the issue was examined and resolved.

*The president of an arts academy, with a highly diverse student body but no faculty and few board members who reflected the student population, decided to undertake a diversity initiative to respond to queries by the funding community about the lack of diversity. One of the assistants in the president's office became the diversity coordinator and followed the president's instructions to*

*convene meetings with experts in the field of diversity. After six months of pronouncements that inclusion and diversity were priorities, the coordinator became frustrated. She had no influence with the faculty or board, which hindered the development of a diversity plan. This responsibility to garner support resided with the president.*

## Diversity Committees

Although the leader must champion the cause, no one person can implement change—it's too complex and labor intensive. Leadership is most often shared with a diversity committee. Bearing in mind that diversity goes beyond race and gender, the best committees are representatives of the entire organization: supervisors, line and administrative staff, volunteers and constituents. The composition of the diversity committee is crucial in establishing credibility, but more importantly, the committee gains credibility by having real power through direct access to and communication with management.

Many organizations engage the services of a consultant experienced in team-building and organizational change who can provide some initial skill building for the committee members. Team skill building acknowledges the group's limitations, clarifies expectations and prepares members for the inevitable dilemma of how to respond to their colleagues' resistance (overt and covert), nervousness, denial and anxiety.

## The Cycle of the Work

The organizations we have worked with have followed a cyclical format that has proved successful. Beginning with an assessment or diversity audit to determine organizational strengths and challenges, an organization refines its vision and definition of diversity. The resulting data is analyzed, prioritized, developed into a plan for diversity with goals and strategies for communication, education and training. Then, they implement and evaluate. Organizations are in a constant state of learning and will continually loop through the cycle at their pace.

### Assessment

A comprehensive needs assessment or diversity audit will gather data about interpersonal behavior, organizational culture and systems that impact people.<sup>1</sup> Many organizations use some form

*The Diversity Initiative evolved from research that showed that lack of diversity within nonprofit organizations had a profound impact on the effectiveness of their services and program delivery.*

*Organizations are in a constant state of learning and will continually loop through the cycle at their pace.*

of survey and find that process sufficient, while others use individual interviews and focus groups to gather more specific information in general and about issues raised by survey responses. Engaging consultants for this work often helps with issues of confidentiality and objectivity.

### Findings and Prioritizing

After the findings are summarized, the diversity committee discusses and prioritizes the needs and actions to be taken. Our experience with DI grantees at this juncture has been universally high anxiety. Some of the feedback may be highly critical. The list of issues is generally a long one with some representing overwhelming challenges.

Participants expect to hear results in a timely, succinct, open manner; this group includes the board, volunteers and stakeholders. Ideally, the first presentation is communicated in person with plenty of opportunity for questions, and the presenters should anticipate resistance. Resistance is a part of most real change processes.

## Tips for Change

Given the magnitude of this very serious work, we must find ways to lighten up and build in the fun factor. Organizations in the DI have implemented all manner of activities to engage their colleagues and sustain the efforts. One particularly popular activity is potluck lunches—an ethnic smorgasbord of dishes—which has been employed by at least 80 percent of the organizations. Food is the easiest, fastest way to open dialogues about and celebrate difference. People in the organization bring food from their culture and everyone indulges in an incredible feast.

Another technique used by a nonprofit focused on education is the idea of a book club. Through e-mail, a staff member informed his colleagues that he was reading a book about race and power. He scheduled a discussion group over lunch and invited his colleagues to bring brown-bag lunches and discuss the book. Some staff who had been very reluctant to participate in discussions about diversity during staff meetings and retreats participated. It was easier for them to participate in what they perceived as a more objective setting. Each of these strategies (and there are others) can be used as initial steps to create an environment conducive to implementing change.

The findings guide the development of a diversity mission statement that includes the organization's vision and definition of diversity.

Prioritizing is a struggle because the goal is not to eliminate issues but to determine a sequence that keeps all issues on the table yet organizes the work into responsive, manageable components. If this task is linked with a strategic planning process or if the analysis is facilitated using a strategic planning model, prioritization is easily coordinated with decisions already in place about the organization and its work in the near and long term.

### Education and Training—"A Process Not An Event"

The DI experience is that all organizations need both education and training as part of a deliberately designed learning process.<sup>2</sup> Education builds awareness, and training provides knowledge and skill building. Spend time analyzing the kind of assistance needed and seeking the best professionals to facilitate these activities. For years, training was viewed as the be-all and end-all to diversity challenges. Many organizations made the mistake of prematurely imposing training programs on staff. This raised false expectations and too often lacked clarity of purpose and follow-up strategies.

Patti DeRosa of Changeworks Consulting offers comprehensive descriptions of the kinds of trainings available (see Approaches to Diversity box).<sup>3</sup> Most organizations employ elements from more than one of these training models, as there are many ways that they overlap. Often an entire staff is educated through valuing difference and anti-racism training. Managers may follow up with legal compliance and managing diversity while line staff may follow up with competency-based training.

### Evaluation

I would suggest the best evaluations have been planned at the outset of any diversity initiative. A clear connection between goal setting and anticipated outcomes helps an organization develop measurable objectives.

### Keep the Cycle Moving

I cannot emphasize strongly enough that there is no end to a process that is aimed at actually creating diversity. The core steps of assessing, prioritizing, educating and training, implementing and evaluating are the spokes in the wheel of organizational change.

One thing to be mindful of is staff turnover, which has stymied the best of intentions. One

grantee lost four of the principal movers and shakers in an organization within the first year of the organization's diversity initiative. All the plans were delayed a full year before the organization could regroup and begin again.

Include education and training about the organization's vision for diversity in all orientations for new staff.

## Characteristics of Diversity Work

With the endlessly cycling loop of activities as the foundation, diversity work also brings deep personal emotions that might not be usually present in the daily activities of an organization. Here are a few.

**Safety.** Crucial to any diversity initiative is the concept of safety. Leadership must create an environment in which all stakeholders believe they can participate with candor and without fear of reprisal. If staff are in a focus group with their supervisor or the executive director, they may be reluctant to be completely candid. Be aware of power dynamics and work with them.

**Communication.** Communication is so important to the success of diversity work. Share information and findings consistently. Make diversity a priority by having it as a standing agenda item for staff and board meetings. Over time the organization builds greater knowledge and understanding.

**Resistance.** Resistance always exists. Most people's first concern is, "How does this have anything to do with my job and me? Am I going to be accused of being a racist?" When it becomes clear that things are about to change, fear of the unknown, fear of loss of power, prestige, uniqueness, and privilege are very threatening. Individuals—no matter how committed to change—have inherent biases. People need assurances that they can admit to their biases in the spirit of finding ways to move the work forward.

Staff resistance is anticipated but board resistance is often a surprising impediment. Instances where board members have served for a number of years create a situation in which the board composition may not have kept pace with the staff and constituent demographic shifts. Often the unspoken issue of class differences is at work and organizational leadership efforts to change policies is an uphill struggle because of board entrenchment.

**Burnout and Plateaus.** After a year, committee members begin to feel fatigue and guilt because they tire of leading the effort. This is a natural phenomenon. Having a procedure in place to bring new members on to the committee constantly reenergizes the work.

Also, grantees often fret about not seeing any progress "over the last two months." I remind them that all work reaches a plateau, which is not a bad thing. Successful integration may mean that what was new to the internal system has in fact become a norm. When I meet with committees, we sometimes brainstorm a list of accomplishments on newsprint. It never fails; everyone is astonished to see that the list is usually very long and very impressive. It is vital to take stock of accomplishments to date and use them to envision the next stages of the organization's development.

## Consultants

Choose your consultant(s) wisely. Always look at their track records in similar projects. Remember, you are purchasing a service; analyze potential consultants for their expertise and ability to guide a process, but also consider their work style, gauging traits such as personality and flexibility. And never, ever give up ownership of the diversity initiative to a consultant.

## Expect Constant Change—Welcome It

Discomfort is inherent in diversity work. Conversations about race and power, within the context of nonprofit organizations, lead naturally to discussions about organizational diversity. Diversity is about race, age, cultural ethnicity, orientation, gender, ability and class. In all probability, one or more of these factors comprise diversity challenges in any organization.

Determining what issues exist and how to address them requires acceptance of two fundamental tenets. One, organizational diversity initiatives *change* organizations both in what they look like and how they accomplish their work. Two, diversity initiatives are ongoing processes—living, breathing efforts *without conclusion*. The work requires dismantling and retooling the systems infrastructure to reflect a commitment to diversity and reinforcing the new structure with built-in accountabilities at every level of the organization. Achieving diversity is a gradual process. Critical to the success of any undertaking is acknowledgement—celebration even—of

*Many organizations made the mistake of prematurely imposing training programs on staff. This raised false expectations and too often lacked clarity of purpose and follow-up strategies.*

each and every achievement. Without attention to these benchmarks, motivation wanes and overall goals appear daunting.

Creating work environments that encourage expression and the exchange of ideas distinguish good organizations from organizations that excel.

### Endnotes

1. See *Achieving Diversity: A Step-by-Step Guide*. Boston, MA: Human Resources Personnel Collaborative's Diversity Initiative.
2. See Arredondo, Patricia. 1996. *Successful Diversity Management Initiatives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

3. DeRosa, Patti. 2001. "Social Change or Status Quo? Approaches to Diversity Training." Randolph, MA: ChangeWorks Consulting. ([www.changeworksconsulting.org/articles2.html](http://www.changeworksconsulting.org/articles2.html))

### About the Author

Tyra B. Sidberry has been the director of the Diversity Initiative, a collaborative of grantmakers who fund diversity work, since 1993.

## Social Change Or Status Quo? Approaches To Diversity Training

"Diversity training" is an increasingly common approach that organizations are using to address the realities and challenges of the diverse workforce and society. In her over 20 years of experience, Patti DeRosa has identified six basic models of "diversity training," detailed below.

### The Intercultural Approach

The primary focus of the Intercultural Approach is the development of cross-cultural understanding and communication between people and nations. It examines the ways in which human beings speak, reason, gesture, act, think, and believe. In this approach, ignorance, cultural misunderstanding, and value clashes are seen as the problem, and increased cultural awareness, knowledge, and tolerance are the solution.

### The Legal Compliance Approach

The classic Legal Compliance training approach uses words like "Affirmative Action," "equal opportunity," and "qualified minorities." It is based in legal theory, civil rights law, and human resource development strategies. It is primarily concerned with monitoring the recruitment, hiring, and promotional procedures affecting women and people of color so as to increase representation in the organization and comply with anti-discrimination laws.

### The Managing Diversity Approach

Managing Diversity has a very strong presence nationally, particularly in corporations, and receives much attention in the mainstream media. The driving force in this approach is that the demographics of the U.S. are rapidly changing. To survive

and thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, businesses must tap into the diverse labor pool and customer base.

### The Prejudice Reduction Approach

The Prejudice Reduction model has its roots in the Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) movement. RC theory asserts that all human beings are born with tremendous intellectual and emotional potential but that these qualities become blocked and obscured as we grow older. As a diversity training model, the Prejudice Reduction approach applies the RC framework of exploring and healing past hurts caused by prejudice and bigotry.

### The Valuing Differences Approach

The term "Valuing Differences" is often used along with "managing diversity." Cultural pluralism and the "salad bowl" vision (rather than the "melting pot") are core beliefs of this approach. Rather than ignoring human differences, Valuing Differences recognizes and celebrates them as the fuel of creativity and innovation.

### The Anti-Racism Approach

Anti-Racism is at the heart of the "diversity movement," for without it, the other approaches would not exist. This expressly political approach emphasizes distinctions between personal prejudice and institutional racism. Terms such as power, oppression, and activism are common in this approach. The use of the word "racism" itself may indicate this approach, as followers of other models may tend to avoid it.

**Source:** From DeRosa, Patti. 2001. "Social Change or Status Quo? Approaches to Diversity Training." Randolph, MA: ChangeWorks Consulting. ([www.changeworksconsulting.org/articles2.html](http://www.changeworksconsulting.org/articles2.html))

Copyright 2002.  
All rights reserved by  
Third Sector New  
England, Boston, MA.  
(Volume 9, Issue 2).  
The *Nonprofit  
Quarterly* features  
innovative thinking and  
management practices  
in the nonprofit sector.  
For reprint permission  
or subscription  
information please call  
1-800-281-7770.