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Upfront

Diversity Training Doesn't Work How can companies hire and promote more women and minorities?

By Alana Conner Snibbe

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Diversity Training Doesn't Work

How can companies hire and promote more women and minorities?

Recognizing that it had a problem attracting and retaining female attorneys, a well-known law firm recently took a dose of diversity training. The firm paid trainers handsomely to teach the lawyers “how to talk to women without offending them and how to be sensitive to the fact that women are responsible for childbearing and child rearing,” says Alexandra Kalev, a sociologist with the Robert Wood Johnson Health & Society Scholars Program at the University of California, Berkeley.

What the trainers didn't do, she says, was notice that the firm was systematically assigning its institutional clients to its male attorneys. Without experience representing these most prestigious counselees, the female attorneys stayed stuck in the lowest rungs of the practice.

Prejudice and the old-boy network undoubtedly fed some of these sexist shenanigans, says Kalev. “The problem,” she continues, “is that people think the solution is just to reverse the cause” – by hiring training programs to change the managers’ prejudices, for example, or by creating mentoring programs to loop women and minorities into the old-boy network. “But it’s not so simple,” she says, citing the first-ever system-

atic evaluation of diversity programs. Instead, the most effective way to diversify workforces is for organizations to hold themselves responsible for setting and meeting their affirmative action goals.

Kalev conducted the evaluation with her colleagues Frank Dobbin of Harvard University and Erin Kelly of the University of Minnesota. Their study appears in the August 2006

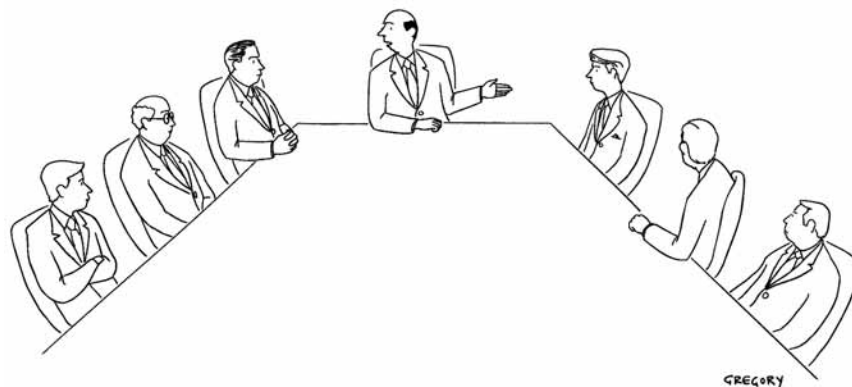
mance feedback to change individuals’ hearts and minds. To find out which of these three diversity-promoting programs each company uses, the researchers first interviewed them. They then mined the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s database to determine the number of black female, black male, white female, and white male managers in each company from

1971 to 2002. Using these findings, the researchers tested how much each diversity program increased the proportion of black or female managers in these companies over the 31-year period.

Their analysis showed that companies with an organizational approach to increasing diversity significantly swelled their managerial ranks with women and black employees.

Appointing a diversity committee to set and monitor affirmative action goals proved especially effective, raising the number of white female managers by 14 percent, of black female managers by 30 percent, and of black male managers by 10 percent.

Companies that relied on mentoring or networking programs, in contrast, had considerably less success in diversifying their workforces, as did companies that attempted to reverse individuals’ bias with diversity train-



“In the interest of cultural diversity, we’ve hired Jason, here, who owns a number of hip-hop CDs.”

issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

Using data from 708 randomly selected medium-sized U.S. companies, the researchers compared three approaches to promoting diversity – those that use affirmative action plans, diversity committees, and diversity staff to change the organization itself; those that use mentoring and network programs to change employee relationships; and those that use diversity training and perfor-

ing or performance feedback. Indeed, companies that confronted individual biases actually thinned their pools of women and black managers, perhaps because these methods inspire backlash against the very groups that they are designed to help.

“Diversity training – which is one of the most popular and profitable approaches – is a sham,” says Kalev. “I don’t think that diversity trainers are bad people trying to exploit, lie, or deceive. They just don’t know that it doesn’t work.”

Shirley Davis, director of diversity initiatives for the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), disagrees with Kalev and colleagues’ conclusions. Although there are

many diversity-training programs that do not work, she says, those that “engage the audience, solicit input and feedback, are endorsed by the leadership, and give employees a takeaway of what they can do differently” are effective. She does not know, however, whether companies that use SHRM’s diversity-training products and services consequently attract and retain more women and minorities.

Kalev says that, in the case of the low-female law firm, a diversity committee or staff member would likely notice that senior staff routinely overlook women when assigning plum cases. The committee or staff member could then alert senior

managers about the disparities, help them set concrete goals for more equitably distributing the cases, and then make sure that the women get the resources they need to perform at their best. A diversity task force or staff member would also notice that the diversity training wasn’t helping, she says.

Although the authors note that “inequality in attainment at work may be rooted in managerial bias and the social isolation of women and minorities,” they ultimately conclude that “the best hope for remedying [inequality] may lie in practices that assign organizational responsibility for change.”

—Alana Conner Snibbe