



The Concept of Diversity

Dr. David Washington
Washington & Company



Washington & Company, LLC 2008. All rights reserved. ©

For information or permission to reprint, please contact Washington & Company at:

E-mail: services@dwashingtonllc.com

Fax: 1-919-313-4505

Mail: Washington & Company/Permissions
4819 Emperor Blvd, Suite 400
Durham, NC 27703

The Conceptual Framework

In a multicultural nation such as the United States, one would assume that the concept of diversity would have a clear definition; but the definition of diversity differs from person to person, from organization to organization, and from author to author. In some organizations, diversity is strictly focused upon race, gender, religion, and disability status; in other organizations, the concept of diversity is extended to sexual orientation, body image, and socioeconomic status. In this section we will discuss various models that explain diversity; and the benefits of diversity.

Explaining Diversity

Wellner (2000) conceptualized diversity as representing a multitude of individual differences and similarities that exist among people. Diversity can encompass many different human characteristics such as race, age, creed, national origin, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation. The characteristics representing diversity are illustrated in Gardenswartz & Rowe's (1994) Four Layers of Diversity Model.

Gardenswartz & Rowe (1994) described diversity as being like an onion, possessing layers that once peeled away reveals the core. According to Gardenswartz & Rowe (1994) the four layers of diversity are organizational dimensions, external dimensions, internal dimensions, and personality.

The organizational dimensions represents the outer most layer and consists of characters such as management status, union affiliation, work location, seniority, divisional department, work content/field, and functional level classification. The characteristics of diversity associated with this layer are items under the control of the organization in which one works. The people can influence this layer in a limited capacity, because control rests with the organization in which a person works. The next layer is the external dimensions.

The external dimension represents those characteristics that deal with the life choices of an individual. The individual exercises a higher level of control over these characteristic than in the organization dimension. The characteristics in this layer are personal habits, recreational habits, religion, educational background, work experience, appearance, status, marital status, geographic location, and income. Meanwhile, the layer where an individual exercises the least amount of control is the internal dimensions.

In the internal dimension of diversity an individual has no control over these characteristics. These characteristics are assigned at birth, such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, and physical ability. Often these characteristics are the sources of prejudice and discrimination. At the core of the Four Layers of Diversity Model is personality.

Personality is described as traits and stable characteristics of an individual that are viewed as determining particular consistencies in the manner in which that person behaves in any given situation and over time (Winstanley, 2006). The personality of an individual is influenced by the

other three levels of the model. The other layers help shape the individual's perception, disposition, and actions, as the individual interacts with the world around them.

The Benefits of Diversity

Diversity brings together individuals from various backgrounds that possess important skill that stimulate organizational competitiveness and growth (Fassinger, 2008). The benefit of diversity can be seen in several areas such as employee relations, strategic advantage, and tapping into new markets.

In a diverse environment where people can interact and share ideas, organizational growth and health are present. The exchange of ideas creates an atmosphere of cultural acceptance that can lead to improvements in employee relations (Chavez & Weisinger, 2008). When individuals perceive that their ideas and cultures are valued, they have great ownership in the organization. In addition to positive employee relations, diversity can provide a strategic advantage for organizations.

A significant body of research on top management teams has shown that diversity leads to superior outcomes in decision making (Dalton, 2006; Fassinger, 2008; Mannix & Neale, 2005). The explanation for better decision making from a diverse team is that their approach to the problem with alternative views and perspectives; this allows for a wider range of possibilities that could not be generated by homogenous group (Dalton, 2006). Wong (2008) states "diversity brings together different experiences and perspectives that serve as the catalysts for innovation and productivity" (p. 390). The strategic advantage given by promoting diversity within the organization can be the impetus to make entrance into new markets and new customers that were previously inaccessible.

Many companies such as IBM, Toyota, Coca-Cola, and other organizations are leveraging diversity to tap into underserved markets and customers. For example, Coca-Cola has used its diversity to develop a market in the Hispanic community for one of its new soft drinks. Another example is the Longo Toyota car dealership that has hired salespeople that speak various languages to serve their diverse client base. Workforce diversity can assist an organization by providing new markets that have not been previously developed and ensured retention of current markets (Perkins, Thomas, & Taylor, 2000).