

How to Win Senior Management's Support For Diversity

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As we move forward into the 1990s, many companies are embracing diversity change efforts to make their organizations more competitive. But, any company that attempts this type of change without a visible and solid commitment from its senior management ultimately will fail. Senior management support is important for major organizational changes, but it's critical for diversity change efforts.

Diversity change efforts are a unique partnership among three elements: individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds, internal human resources consultants, and senior management. Providing leadership by charting a specific and compelling vision is one of the specific roles of senior management. Without its genuine commitment, the company receives only a generic, non-evocative vision or no vision at all. The diversity change effort then becomes a rudderless boat.

HOW TO MAKE IT WORK

Getting senior management deeply committed to diversity is not easy. Most, but not all, senior managers are white males who come from backgrounds of some privilege. They simply may not have had the experience of feeling like an outsider, of being blatantly discriminated against, or failing at something and wondering whether it was a result of their skills instead of their gender or race. Senior managers also have so many organizational challenges to face that they often do not perceive diversity as a critical issue. The following ideas are designed to win senior management's commitment:

Interview them

Define who is the senior team and then individually interview each member about diversity. This information will prevent you from treating the senior team as a monolithic group. There may be some diversity among what appears at first to be a homogenous group. This information also helps you identify some allies for the diversity effort.

Directly link diversity to the business

It's not enough to say, "Diversity will make us more competitive," or "We must respond to the demographic changes in our labor force." Specifics will grab senior management's attention (and that of the whole organization). Determine where diversity issues lie. Are they within the labor pool, and if so, which pool specifically? Do the issues exist throughout the company or just, for example, in the Southwest division? If the issues are more focused on the customer base, determine which customers. International? Domestic? Specific groups?

Give them data

The more data you can provide to senior management that they perceive as relevant, the more interested and supportive they will be to the change process. In the first place, never insulate senior managers from problems related to diversity. In many companies, senior management usually is the last to know, partly the result of organizational norms, such as "no news is good news." Start briefing senior managers about complaints, potential lawsuits, and hiring and retention problems. Data also can be provided through benchmarking the best practices related to diversity from companies around the country (or the world).

Find out what they lose sleep over

This does not suggest that you pry into the secret lives of senior managers. Rather, find out what they truly worry about for the organization. Then, your challenge is to find the ways that diversity can help alleviate their worries. For example, if their concern is market share, find a way to expand the product or service into diverse markets.

Educate them

Organizations often provide diversity training for managers and even employees, but not senior management. Why? Some common answers: "They already know it." "No time." "They need it, but they won't do it." "It's beneath them."

Senior managers, however, can play several key roles in a successful diversity change effort that requires them to legitimize the conversation about diversity throughout the company. Senior managers must also model the behavior. It's a very difficult task for senior managers to "talk the talk," much less "walk the walk," without having spent some time exploring diversity.

Link Diversity to other organizational initiative

While some organizations say, "We want to do something about diversity, but our plates are too full already," reality dictates that diversity can and should be linked to other major initiatives. These initiatives may be total quality management, self-managing work teams, or career development, to name a few.