

Examples of Diversity Issues in the Workplace

By Mitch Mitchell

Diversity problems exist in businesses across the United States. Having a strong diversity program in the workplace is a smart idea. It sets the tone for how that business wants to be seen in the eyes of both its employees and the outside world. Diversity initiatives bring people with different backgrounds together, integrates the ideas of all, and everyone, including consumers, benefits as a result.

Diversity Issues

- Diversity programs can help address many issues. Some of those issues are racism, sexism, ageism, cultural differences, class, religion, politics, sexual preference and lifestyle. Having a policy, putting the policy into place, then making sure everyone follows those policies, including upper management, can protect companies from lawsuits, loss of business and the loss of good employees.

How companies handle diversity issues can set the tone for how companies will be perceived by both employees and customers. Over the years, some companies have stepped up to the plate before it was considered the thing to do and set positive diversity practices into motion. Some companies have even had to risk wrath from the outside.

Madison Co.

- Fortune Small Business Magazine recently had an article about a small company in Connecticut, Madison Co., that had an employee go through a major change. Over the course of time, one of its supervisors, Ann Ferraiolo had altered her look, and, then one day, came to work after an operation and was now Tony, a male.

As a manufacturing company, the company president, Steve Schickler, understood what could happen. Instead, he decided to intercede early to make things more comfortable for his supervisor, and let other employees know the company position. He and his human resources director made sure every employee knew to treat Ferraiolo with respect, both before and after the operation. They decided to support the supervisor's sex change, and the company has never missed a beat.

Disney's Gay Health Benefits

- Disney was one of the first large organizations to announce, back in 1995, that it was going to offer health benefits for gay couples. The backlash from religious groups outside the organization was vitriolic. Many boycotts were formed, yet Disney held firm, and now Disney is regularly recognized as one of the top 50 diversity-friendly companies in the United States, being ranked No. 29 by Diversity Inc. Disney, known as a family-friendly organization outside of its walls, had figured out that it needed to be family-friendly on the inside also. They also saw it as a legitimate business decision, following along with policies that were being established in movie studios throughout the industry.

Xerox Mentoring Programs

- Xerox was ranked No. 35 in 2009 by Diversity Inc. It was one of the first international organizations to publicly make diversity a center of their mission back in the 1970s. This led to many mentoring and fast-track programs, and now minorities make up around 20 percent of its management staff, women make up nearly one-third, and black women, a group Xerox has worked with the most, recognizing their disadvantage in many organizations, makes up 20 percent of that group. This is a case where a subgroup of an already disadvantaged group might need to be addressed more thoroughly when looking at diversity issues overall.

Strengthening Employee Relations

- Sometimes a company might need a boost from outside its organization to address specific incidences. One diversity trainer recalls being asked to do a training for a local company months after the airplanes hit the World [Trade](#) Center. There had been internal and external bigoted actions against customers and employees of Middle Eastern descent, or perceived Middle Eastern descent, and it was breaking down employee morale. The trainer put together a program that had many questionnaires that helped participants get to the heart of what was causing them distress. Having the opportunity to air their thoughts and beliefs in a relatively closed forum not only helped them heal quicker, but gave the organization an opportunity to educate employees on the company's diversity initiatives and strengthen employee relations.

Improve Corporate Culture

- In the book "Cross-Cultural [Selling](#) For Dummies," author Michael Soon Lee said, "Treating all team members fairly is important, both legally and ethically, but fairly doesn't mean treating them the same." Recognizing differences in all people and finding ways to integrate them within the organization, improves the corporate culture of that organization. An improved culture means fewer incidences of negative behavior towards each other because of differences, fewer worries about liability and lawsuits and improved communications within the organization.

The best working diversity programs make everyone feel included, and gives everyone the feeling that they're as important as the next person. It fosters high employee loyalty, which means low turnover and fewer internal issues. With all employees able to concentrate on the company goals without having to keep up their shields from worrying about when a negative comment will be coming their way based on their difference, companies will perform better overall.