



DIVERSITY: HEADACHE OR HEADSTART?

**Marie Toma, President
Human Advantage Consulting**

We live in a society often defined by its differences. Multiculturalism, gender politics, affirmative action, preferences and mandates have become part of our national vocabulary. Where once we celebrated the “melting pot” of America, we now seem more concerned with identifying the separate ingredients that make up the stew. We categorize ourselves by race, gender, national origin, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, cultural norms, physical ability and socio-economic status. Even our career choices and work styles can set us apart. Simply put, we’ve discovered we’re diverse. Of course, we always were. But now that we’ve decided to emphasize diversity, where do we go from here? I say embrace it, not only because it’s important to our social policy, but also because it makes good economic sense.

In the workplace, diversity describes the approach to business that values human differences for the vital contributions they can make to organizational success. Properly managed, diversity optimizes the willingness and ability of all employees to contribute to that success, and encourages each to draw fully on the talents, skills and practices that benefit both the individual and the organization. It can encourage many points of view that bear on the tasks and decisions that influence a company’s progress, and it can produce consensus for the ideas, perspectives and solutions that determine future results.

The solid business case to be made for managing and valuing diversity within an organization may be even stronger when applied to external objectives, such as penetrating new markets or smoothly merging competing operations. Companies that add and cultivate employees who mirror the customers they serve, who literally and figuratively speak their language, are better able to serve these customers through a better understanding of cultural differences and an improved sense of what consumers want. And when organizations of differing cultures are blended, willingly or not, it will be those that work to harmoniously overcome conflicts that will enjoy the greatest success. Gaining these benefits, however, is neither simple nor easy; from the mailroom to the boardroom it requires both enlightened awareness and intelligent management. Leaders who merely dictate a diversity policy but don’t “walk the talk” will have difficulty gaining the trust, dedication, and productivity of their employees.

At its best, diversity encompasses all the core identities that make us unique while encouraging the inclusiveness that values both our similarities and our differences. The goal of diversity is not to count people by category simply to take refuge in the numbers - it is to benefit from the best mix of people regardless of category; to attract people with an array of talents, experiences and perspectives, and then to individually and aggregately empower them to give everything they have in order to attain business objectives. And when organizations create diversity initiatives that tie to their vision, strategic objectives, communication programs and staffing targets, they will more readily motivate, develop and retain their employees.

More than just good *for* business, diversity *is* good business, even when necessary changes may meet with early resistance. Organizations that fail to incorporate effective diversity programs as a fundamental part of their operating plans will face a difficult environment among their employees and from their customers. Bringing diversity to the marketplace may be a challenging process; ignoring it may jeopardize survival. From my perspective, it is far better to lead with initiatives that promise success than to subordinate them to the difficulties that come with change.