

Cultural Competency in the Workplace

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A report from the U.S. Census Bureau released on May 17, 2007, stated that people of color now account for one third of the country's population.

This only serves to emphasize the growing diversity in the entering workforce and the workplace overall. Whether diversity is approached as a human relations issue or as a business concept, the fact is that the demographics of our community are changing, and the results are affecting our workplaces.

The effects are seen as questions arise around language, generational differences, national origin and family structure, as well as the more traditional religion, ethnicity and gender. Employees today will be working closely with those who are different—people who live different realities and thus, have different perspectives.

As the opportunity for interaction between these diverse individuals increases, so do the opportunities for conflict and tension. Equipping employees with the skills and resources to successfully manage and capitalize on these changes will translate into success within the organization, as well as with outside clients and vendors.

There is a recent trend within businesses and organizations toward cultural competency training. This is indicative of their efforts to successfully deal with the changing demographics of our society. They recognize that the faster an employee interacts effectively with others who may be “different,” whether co-workers or clients, the more rapidly that employee will be an asset to them.

This is not about political correctness; that is a real simplification of this complex issue. Effective cultural competency programs take participants through a wide variety of topics, including self-awareness, education and exposure to diversity concepts and issues, as well as training in cross cultural communication. The process is continuous, but results are seen immediately as new awareness results in adjusted behavior.

Here are some criteria to use when evaluating your existing cultural competency training program, or when implementing a new one:

- **Will the program be a part of a larger diversity initiative?** If not, is there a structure in place that will support the value of this program? Training must move participants beyond awareness of differences, to the realization that differences need to be valued. It must interpret culture in a broad sense and be made available to all employee groups.
- **Is there clear commitment from the top?** This involves the allocation of both financial and staff resources, as well as clear public support from the CEO. Participation should be mandatory for all levels of management. Outcomes should be linked to best practices in management, and top managers held accountable for measurable goals.

- **Do your organization's values and principles, as well as formal policies and procedures, support a culturally competent environment?** This initiative cannot exist in a vacuum. There must be a real commitment to stop the transmission of negative behavior by holding people accountable for their behavior.
- **What thought has been given to content and design?** Course design should be current and incorporate best practices, including a clearly defined review process that includes accountability and evaluation. Training should be hands on and intellectually stimulating, delivered by qualified experts. Adequate time must be allotted for real change to happen.

An organization that seeks to make the most of its diversity will work strategically to ensure that everyone feels valued, and is represented, at all levels of the company. It will also work to ensure that company policies and procedures reflect this ongoing commitment.

The good news for companies that commit to increasing the cultural competency of their staffs is that their payoff will be two-fold: their employees will be more effective and efficient because they can work together more harmoniously; and a more effective and efficient work force will ultimately be more profitable.

The Pascall Company [\[LINK TO http://www.thepascallcompany.com\]](http://www.thepascallcompany.com) is a management consulting and strategy firm focusing on **diversity recruiting, diversity consulting and training**, and **human resource management**. We integrate diversity and human resources into a company's overall business strategy resulting in a productive and profitable organization.

Margarita Sarmiento, Senior Consultant, The Pascall Company, designs and presents customized training and implementation programs for public, non-profit and for-profit organizations. These programs focus on improving performance and increasing profits by capitalizing on the diversity of the workforce.