



Management Assistance Program

OPTIMIZING DIFFERENCES: Valuing Diversity and Creating Acceptance

GOALS:

To help organizations and managers:

- Prepare a planning and implementation process within each department or team for incorporating personnel differences into the mainstream mission of the company while retaining the uniqueness that each employee brings to the workplace.
- Acknowledge and recognize the advantages and benefits of diversity in the workplace and encourage employees to foster and develop appropriate workplace relationships with their co-workers.
- Eliminate biases, prejudices, and discrimination of any kind in the workplace.

OVERVIEW:

In today's ever expanding society, more and more companies and worksites are beginning to reflect the diversity of our world. Many organizations are facing changing environments, demands, and workforces. With these changes come a myriad of people, personalities, experiences, and levels of expertise. This amalgam of personnel differences can be a playing field for conflict and dysfunction, an area of opportunity and creativity, or something somewhere in between – which is the case for most organizations. Without deliberate and specific planning directed at exploring the positive opportunities created by the influx of different types of staff, businesses oscillate between creativity and chaos, and spend inordinate amounts of time, energy, and resources putting out fires. The smartest business practices incorporate the identification, celebration, and optimization of workplace differences into a mosaic that is part of the fabric of its culture.

The purpose of optimizing differences within organizations is not to unearth every facet of every employee, but to discover those characteristics that enhance workplace climate, creativity, work-flow, and overall productivity, then weave them into organizational systems that become operational frameworks within the company.

Optimizing the differences within any given workplace can move that business, not just to “the next level”, but set it up to be adaptable to the ongoing challenges and changes it will face over time.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Recognize the Benefits of Optimizing Differences

Gaining multiple perspectives on plans, strategies, and issues

- Incorporating gender perspective
- Incorporating ethnic perspectives
- Incorporating perspectives from different age groups
- Incorporating perspectives from different levels of experience

Maximization of employee creative processes

- Freedom among staff to share from their individual experiences and perspectives
- Freedom to brainstorm and “dream” of better ways to increase efficiency
- Freedom to share new ideas, thoughts and perspectives on specific old problems or new dilemmas

Recognized and internalized inclusion of all staff

- Feeling like an important member of the work team
- Feeling empowered and trusted
- Understanding their role in relation to the whole organization

Diversity maximization

- Using diversity to create a “better” organization
- Sending the clear message that diversity is demonstrably valued
- Automatically satisfying and surpassing any diversity mandates
- Setting the tone for the future of the organization in a changing world

2. Defining the Components of Optimizing Differences

Identifying differences and recognizing them as resources

All workers are also consumers of goods and services and their opinions, based on their life experiences can be valuable to the organization. Someone from another country may have a vantage point that is not as entrenched in seeing things the way they have always been as domestic personnel. Women and men offer sometimes widely diverse views and opinions of the same situation, which if viewed intelligently is a good thing. The best businesses treat these perspectives as data – almost as an internal

focus groups – and find ways to tap into all the information that is available to them. Such practices require:

- Corporate commitment to inclusion that is communicated to managers
- Teaching managers to value differences and to seek input from all perspectives
- Teaching supervisors to acknowledge and encourage employees to use their differences to gain more solutions and ideas from their individual perspectives

Celebrating Differences

Given that there really is no such thing as a “normal” type of person, and that we all have differences, the next step after clearly identifying our differences is to celebrate them as resources. It means creating internal structures, customs, and events that shed light on and pay homage to the width and depth of the experiences of all staff members. It doesn’t mean necessarily formally celebrating each group’s holidays or recognition days or months but it does mean creating an atmosphere in which the differences are no longer seen as abnormal, but as important components of the organization:

- At the corporate level
- At the management level
- At the departmental level
- At the unit level

Each group recognizing and acknowledging the value and strength of the differences as they contribute to the advancement of the whole organization. It is more than recognizing individuals for their personal contributions, it is recognizing the strength and character of the entire group as a mixture of many types they work together and form the unique accumulation of experiences, history, backgrounds and skills.

Optimizing Differences

The truly evolved workplace, that has learned to make differences the “norm”, experiences the very best of what its workforce has to offer. The key is to respect and amplify individual differences among the employees which enhance relationships and the mission of the organization while, extinguishing the expression of differences which tend to be divisive or anti-social. Knowing the difference requires open-mindedness and objectivity on the part of the manager and organizational leadership. While many

managers still believe that the workplace needs to be homogeneous in order for work to flow smoothly and effectively, in reality the most effective managers today are those who capitalize on the differences between employees and encourage self-expression as it relates to effective communication, cooperation and teamwork. When employees feel they are respected as individuals who have talents, views, and contributions which they can add to the good of the whole, they are more inclined to try to blend their differences rather than force their individual opinions or personal biases.

Generating Universal Buy-In From Staff for Optimizing Differences

- Corporate systems and structures must reflect the organization's commitment
- Human Resources must include this perspective in its orientations as well as its performance appraisals, and training and educational systems
- Managers and supervisors should receive ongoing training that incorporate the company's commitment to diversity and respect
- Employee training and policy materials should reflect the corporate perspective of inclusion and appreciation for each individual's contribution.

SUMMARY: Tips for Optimizing Differences

- Accept individual employee differences as “normal” in today’s workplace.
- Accept differences as positive resources which can advance the organization.
- Encourage the expression of individual differences which expand creativity and motivate employees to advance professionally within the organization.
- Consciously seek to accept and learn from those perceived as having differences while channeling those differences toward productive results.
- Develop an awareness of the advantages of diversity in the workplace for you and your employees and share those advantages with your team members.
- Recognize that there may be times when workplace differences may create boundaries and barriers to communication and understanding which employees will need to work through and resolve for the good of the organization.
- Assist employees who have problems with accepting diversity by providing them with personal and professional resources to gain understanding of the importance to respect and work well with all co-workers.
- Help employees appreciate the advantages of individual differences by acknowledging and pointing out specific instances of benefits when they occur.
- Seek to encourage and support employees who feel that their differences are not appreciated by acknowledging their strengths and contributions.
- Treat disrespect, prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion as performance issues and address all aspects of behaviors demonstrating these issues immediately.