

A NEW MULTICULTURAL
MOVEMENT DECLARES THAT
DIVERSITY IS ESSENTIAL TO
STAYING COMPETITIVE

CREATING INCLUSION

Be honest with yourself. Have you ever passed judgment on a walk-in job applicant before he or she has spoken a word or filled out an application? You simply took one look at the person and thought, "He won't fit in" or "She's not who we're looking for." If you're honest, your answer is yes. ▼ These snap judgments are called first impressions. They're inevitable. We've all passed initial judgments on people based only on appearances. As much as we don't want to admit it, we sometimes size up individuals because of their clothes, their race, their gender, their weight, their age, their accent or other immediate cues.

BY KATIE GARZA



W

we perceive these visual traits as insight to who a person is on the inside. The man is old; he must be a slow and feeble worker. The woman is overweight; she must be lazy and indifferent.

The danger in these quick judgments is that they often betray us. When we make decisions based on superficial traits alone, we most likely are turning away untapped talent and resources that could make our businesses more competitive and profitable.

Back in the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed a Civil Rights Act bringing affirmative action into the business arena. This anti-discrimination movement made it a legal and moral obligation to provide equal opportunity for minorities and women within the workforce. It was seen as a temporary measure to "level the playing field," so to speak.

obligation based on numbers and statistics. It was now corporate America's social responsibility.

On the heels of cultural diversity was borne yet another human resource movement called inclusion training. This business approach is still widely used in today's corporate environment. Inclusion training encompasses all of the high points of cultural diversity yet takes it one step further by making it relevant to a business's bottom line.

The goal of inclusion training is to provide an atmosphere where every employee can reach his or her fullest potential. This benefits the customer and the company.

"Inclusion training says that cultural diversity makes good business sense," says Pamela Leri, director of global diversity at PricewaterhouseCoopers Unifi Network. She points out that anti-discrimination movements in the past focused on social, moral and legal obligations. "Inclusion

training shows that there are solid business reasons behind including all groups in a workforce. It's not just 'the nice thing to do.'"

According to Leri, numerous high-profile companies in various industries have implemented inclusion training over the past 20 years; Merck and Hewlett-Packard are two noteworthy practitioners. Recently the rental-purchase industry, specifically RentWay Inc., began its implementation of inclusion training.

"I think that many large Fortune 500 companies had seen the need for inclusion training much earlier on than the rent-to-own industry," says Leri, who recently consulted with RentWay, the nation's second-largest rental-purchase company with approximately 1,100 stores in 41 states. RentWay has taken numerous steps to incorporate inclusion. The



"THIS IS NOT A SOCIO-ECONOMIC LESSON. IT'S ABOUT PROVIDING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR PERSONAL GROWTH AND CAREER SATISFACTION. IF WE KEEP TAPPING THE SAME RESOURCES FOR TALENT, WE'LL BECOME STAGNANT AND MAY NOT ACHIEVE OUR FULLEST POTENTIAL AS A COMPANY."

Critics say that the fault with affirmative action, however, was that it primarily addressed only racial discrimination and operated on the assumption that minorities and women had deficits and needed extra support to thrive. The racial quotas that were meant to "equalize" the business environment sometimes resulted in accusations of "reverse discrimination"; suddenly there was a new kind of dissension among the workforce. To a certain degree, the legal approach to "equal employment opportunity" suffered a backlash.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, however, a new approach gained popularity: cultural diversity training. Cultural diversity training addressed differences in race, as well as ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, tenure, social class and geographic origin—all factors that filter an individual's outlook on life and work.

Cultural diversity taught business professionals to embrace each other's differences and have mutual respect for one another. Cultural diversity was no longer a legal

company now has a department devoted to inclusion training and regularly schedules inclusion workshops for store managers.

"This is not a socio-economic lesson," says Wallace Wright, director of inclusion at RentWay. "It's about providing an environment for personal growth and career satisfaction. If we keep tapping the same resources for talent, we'll become stagnant and may not achieve our fullest potential as a company."

Wright explained during a recent inclusion seminar in Shreveport, LA, that RentWay's rapid business growth in its early stages and the company's need to meet staffing requirements partly contributed to its inclusion opportunities. He said it is now time to focus on issues such as inclusion, employee development and promoting from within.

A critical component of inclusion training is that companies can gain a competitive advantage in their industries by building corporate cultures that encourage all groups—including white males—to work to their fullest potential.

The theory is that all individuals, based on their different life and work experiences, are capable of finding new ways to solve problems, better serve existing customers and reach out to new markets. Leri says inclusion training can make the rental-purchase industry more inviting for newcomers.

"Employees don't quit companies; they quit environments," says Leri. And Wright agrees. "If you want to retain quality employees, you need to show them that you value their contributions," he says.

Inclusion training teaches managers how to recognize their personal "filters," or biases, which can undermine the potential success of others in the company or prevent untapped talent from contributing to the company. The participants at the recent Shreveport inclusion seminar talked about how their familial backgrounds and geographic origins have influenced—both negatively and positively—the way they approach business decisions today.

One man admitted that his extensive military background sometimes causes him to view civilian life as unorganized and frustrating—a filter that affects his expectations of other employees. Another gentleman talked about his upbringing in Chicago, IL, and how it filtered his views of Southern people—a bias he still battles now that he works in Louisiana. A third participant pointed out that his mother, who single-handedly raised three children and juggled two jobs, influenced his opinion about women. He said watching his mother as a boy made him realize early on that women could be strong, self-sufficient providers—an opinion that has influenced him to recruit more female employees within his stores.

REACHING OUT TO THE CUSTOMERS

Yet valuing and understanding diversity within the company is only one of the objectives behind inclusion training. "Inclusion is about making customers feel welcome too," says Leri, noting that a diverse workforce positions a company to be more in touch with an increasingly diverse marketplace.

According to Wright, in addition to promoting a diverse workforce, companies can gain a competitive edge by reaching out to surrounding neighborhoods. In essence, companies that practice inclusion make the community feel included as well.

Wright recommends getting involved in the community by getting out and talking to civic leaders and other local business people. With this information, rental-purchase companies can plan marketing strategies and public relations campaigns that are more effective and relevant to their local markets. If you discover that consumers in your neighborhood prefer family-run businesses, you might want to find ways to make your business more family friendly.

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

Alvin Odom, a RentWay employee who attended the Shreveport seminar, says that inclusion training offers an important message that resonates with employees and customers alike. "It tells me a lot about the company itself when it decides to implement something like this," he says.

Allen Kelly, a fellow workshop participant, agrees. "I like that inclusion focuses on discovering the potential in all individuals; it's not just about racism."

Wright says he hopes that the managers take home what they learn from inclusion training and apply it to their stores. "All this doesn't mean anything unless you deliver the message to your employees and set a good example," he says. "You are the most important people in our organization, because you are where it happens."

Wright's message rang true for seminar participant Sonny Lewis Jr., who said he now realizes that creating inclusion relies heavily on his actions and the tone set at the top. "I think from now on I'll be paying just as much attention to my own performance as I do my employees' performances," he says.

Katie Garza is a free-lance writer.

SUGGESTED READING ON INCLUSION TRAINING AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

BOOKS

- ▶ *Managing a Diverse Workforce: Regaining the Competitive Edge*, by John P. Fernandez, Lexington Books, 1991
- ▶ *Profiting in America's Multicultural Marketplace: How to Do Business Across Cultural Lines*, by Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D., Lexington Books, 1991

ARTICLES

- ▶ "Making Differences Matter: A New Paradigm for Managing Diversity," by David A. Thomas and Robin J. Ely, *Harvard Business Review*, September–October 1996
- ▶ "From Affirmative Action to Affirming Diversity," by Roosevelt Thomas, *Harvard Business Review*, No. 90213