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We've heard the expression "value differences" used for years. It appears on Web sites and in diversity vision statements. But how do organizations go beyond proclamations? What does it really mean in a practical sense, and can it be measured?

Theoretically, if an organization creates a culture that embraces and leverages all human and organizational differences, then employees will be engaged and perceive they have the opportunity to develop and contribute to their fullest potential. Subsequently, their organizations will benefit from increased innovation and productivity. Therefore, it is incumbent on organizations to determine what subtle barriers inhibit employees from feeling engaged and part of the broader organizational "we."

When participants in an online diversity e-learning course are provided with eight scenarios dealing with a range of workplace differences, one that creates the highest level of discomfort is communicating with someone who has a strong accent. So, in a practical sense, valuing differences could mean people should make more of an effort to listen to those who speak differently and appreciate their accents rather than suggesting in polite ways that they need to ditch them if they want to be successful.

A number of years ago, an organization that said all the right words - how much they valued diversity - developed a training course called "Accent Reduction Training." All non-U.S.-born employees were required to attend, which was perceived by many in the target audience to be insulting.

A more sensitive and balanced approach would have been to offer "Accent Appreciation Training" that was mandatory for everyone and an "Accent Reduction" course for anyone who wanted to attend. This would have conveyed the message that the organization valued differences and that it didn't require those with accents to conform in order for their contributions to be appreciated.

One organization added employees' "style" on a popular personality assessment to their employee ID badges, while another had everyone's "color profile" on another assessment tool placed prominently at their work cubicles. These organizations had predetermined the styles "most valued," and if you were the wrong one, it was like flashing a neon sign that said you didn't fit the desired profile.

As an external consultant I noticed that this was different from anything I'd seen in other organizations, so I asked questions. Regardless of position in the organization, everyone seemed to know which personality or color profile was most beneficial in their company. Rather than valuing and leveraging these differences, the tools became a more objective way to validate that the "right people" were receiving development assignments and promotions. This might not have been the intention, but it had become the outcome.

Most organizations continue to rely on numerical representations of protected Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) classes to measure their diversity effectiveness. Indeed, they win awards for this, and like people, organizations tend to do what is rewarded. Yet, while representation of protected classes will continue to be a valid and important metric for diversity, most organizations define diversity in broader terms that reflect visible as well as invisible differences, as shown on their Web sites and in corporate diversity statements.

An organization can determine if it has created a culture that values differences and has achieved full utilization of its human resources. In addition to tracking representation of visible or EEO differences, examine hiring and promotion patterns to see if those with invisible differences are reflected at all levels of the organization. Look for differences such as:

- **Accents:** Are the more successful non-U.S.-born employees recognized for how well they speak English?
- **Sexual Orientation:** Is the culture perceived to be "safe" if 10 percent to 12 percent of the population, based

Value Differences: Put Concept into Practice (continued):

on research, is not heterosexual? How many LGBT employees can you identify and where are they in the organizational structure?

- **Religious Beliefs:** Is there one specific religious background practiced by all of the senior executives?
- **Appearance:** One organization was hard-pressed to identify a single person at director level or higher who was perceived as overweight or was a less than 5'10" tall male.
- **Marital Status:** Women tend to notice when women who have made it to VP or above are single, have a stay-at-home spouse or have no children.
- **Education:** Did most senior executives graduate from the same colleges and universities? Do most of them have the same degrees?

Include questions on employee surveys that speak directly to invisible differences. High scores will indicate whether employees, regardless of their background, perceive they are engaged and valued.

The paradox of diversity is that it won't be valued until it adds value. Yet, it is difficult to add value when employees don't feel valued for their unique differences.

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