

## Diversity Training Pitfalls to Avoid

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By Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR

"Diversity training is like spam. Too many people get it and nobody wants it," said Leona Salazar, a conservative blogger, in a Jan. 16, 2011, posting. Whether one agrees with her assessment or not, experts say diversity training is a minefield that HR and diversity professionals must navigate with care to avoid doing more harm than good.

"I have sat through some nightmare diversity training programs which seemed designed to make whites feel guilty and minorities feel like victims," said Michael Soon Lee, president of EthnoConnect, a multicultural marketing firm.

"I've also been through diversity training that obviously did not have the support of upper management and was only being conducted to meet some federal, state or local legal mandate," he told *SHRM Online*. "They were filled with dry facts and statistics. What a waste of time and money!"

### Prime Examples of What Not to Do

Sources consulted for this article had no difficulty citing examples of bad diversity training.

Linda Konstan of Sensible Human Resources Consulting LLC in the Denver area said she attended a diversity training session in the late 1990s in which the trainers kept using the phrase "you people" when referring to participants. She said the trainers looked at her like she "had two heads" when she mentioned during a break that the phrase could be viewed as off-putting. "They had no idea they were not practicing what they were preaching," she said. "Things went downhill from there as students fled the workshop over the next hour or so."

Michelle Hurdle-Bradford, the social change program manager for YWCA Clark County in Vancouver, Wash., said that in the early 2000s, while serving as a panelist for a session on diversity in financial services, she was asked "How come black people can call each other n----- and we can't?" The audience gasped, she said, because the questioner—the head of human resources for a bank—used the actual word instead of "the n word," which is what participants had been told to say.

"When the human resources person asked another question and used the full 'n word' again, the audience became outraged," Hurdle-Bradford added. "Several people stood up and let [the HR person] know that she was wrong using the full word."

She said she heard later that the HR professional had been fired for insensitivity.

In a separate training session, Hurdle-Bradford observed a white, middle-aged male who asked, "Why do we have to learn about diversity? All diversity does is give sympathy to black people. They don't need any more sympathy because they live on my street next to me and across the street. They have the same chances that I have in life."

"The minority participants looked at each other in disbelief," she said, but the facilitator said nothing to that participant or to another white male who chimed in moments later by saying "I'm just a redneck and feel like that man feels!" Several participants left the training, she said, because they felt that the facilitator had no idea how to respond.

Failure to select training materials carefully can derail a training session as well. The New York Police Department (NYPD) learned that lesson the hard way after officers were shown what *The Village Voice* newspaper called an “anti-Muslim horror flick” in a Jan. 19, 2011, article. The video was described in the article as a “full-length color feature, with more explosions than a *Transformers* sequel and more blood-splattered victims than an *HBO World War II* series.”

NYPD officials reportedly said the film was shown in error and that an outside consultant was in charge of the training.

“Ever since the story broke, reports have been coming in from law enforcement and security officers all over the country complaining that Islamophobic propaganda materials are being used in what are supposed to be ‘objective’ training sessions,” said Cyrus McGoldrick, New York civil rights manager for the Council on American-Islamic Relations. “Many of the complaints about Islam-bashing material being used in law enforcement and security trainings come from non-Muslim officers who are so offended by the ignorance and agenda of their training that they cannot remain silent about it,” he told *SHRM Online*.

Less egregious, though still annoying, examples of what not to do during diversity training abound.

Konstan said she dislikes training programs that require attendees to participate in an interactive exercise with no explanation as to why the exercise was used or how it relates to the topic, as well as programs that focus exclusively on differences with no reference to the ways in which participants are similar.

### **What Works**

Though some find it easy to label all diversity training as worthless, others point to the value of such sessions.

Walt Meyer, now a writer based in San Diego, said he learned to question his assumptions about women after he attended a diversity training session for employees of the San Diego and Imperial Counties Labor Council in 2008. This is because two of the speakers at the training were transgender—one male-to-female and one female-to-male.

According to Meyer’s account, the woman explained during the session that, as a man, her word about anything—business, sports, cars and the like—would be taken at face value. But after she became a woman, she found that people questioned if she knew what she was talking about when she made a comment about football. “The man who had been born a woman said that he observed just the opposite,” Meyer explained. The man was shocked the first time he said something in a group because everyone in the room just took it at face value.

“After the training, I started watching myself—did I make different assumptions about women than I did about men?” Meyer told *SHRM Online*.

Meyer, whose latest book, *Rounding Third* (MaxM Ltd., 2009), is a gay love story between high school baseball teammates, said the training taught him a lot about transgender people as well. “It was amazing to hear the struggles they had had their entire lives having this sneaking feeling they were born the wrong sex,” he said. “To have all of the feelings [and] characteristics of one gender, but all of the outward appearances of the other—that would have to be confusing as hell.”

Nina Godiwalla, author and founder of MindWorks, a firm that trains business professionals in meditation and stress management, said she has gotten a lot out of experiential forms of diversity training, such as [theater-based programs](#) and a “trust walk” she participated in with Leadership Austin, a leadership training program for professionals.

For the trust walk, everyone started out on one side of a large room. Then a moderator asked people to walk across the room if they were part of various groups, such as if they were gay, had mental illness in the family, were Jewish or Native American, had a family member with a disability, were adopted, and the like. "The process is very powerful when one or only a few people have to walk across the room and back because you are all facing a large group of people who are staring at you," she told *SHRM Online*. "At some point, most people have a chance to feel included and/or excluded. ... It is especially effective for those in the majority who rarely know what it's like to feel marginalized."

### What to Shoot For

Lee said effective diversity training programs are those that:

- Have been customized to the needs and challenges of the organization. "This is usually accomplished through extensive interviews with key company personnel," he said.
- Provide a safe atmosphere in which people feel comfortable discussing their and other people's differences while helping them see past those differences to find similarities.
- Challenge participants' long-held assumptions, beliefs and stereotypes.
- Make some people uncomfortable. Discomfort is a good thing, Lee said, "because no one changes their behavior unless they become uncomfortable."
- Help participants understand the challenges of communicating across cultural barriers and offer some simple solutions for bridging gaps.
- Are interactive, so participants have an opportunity to feel what it's like to be part of the "in" group and "out" group.
- Are engaging and fun, "because humor is found in all cultures," he noted.

### The Limitations of Diversity Training

In the Spring 2003 edition of *The Diversity Factor*, Christopher Metzler, Ph.D., associate dean of The School of Continuing Studies at Georgetown University, wrote that poor diversity training and education is one of the top reasons diversity initiatives fail.

"Poor training can cause more damage than no training," he wrote. "On one end of the spectrum, diversity training has become a bastion of political correctness and a feel-good activity. At the other end, it is criticized as too confrontational and overly oppressive. "Effective diversity training should confront the problems, not the people, by exposing behaviors and issues related to oppression and discrimination at the individual, interpersonal, group and organizational levels," the article continued. "It should help participants to understand themselves and others, and to build skills to address these sometimes uncomfortable issues."

In the years since that article was published, Metzler said, there have been "some improvements" in diversity training but they have been minimal. "Organizations still do not make a clear enough link between diversity and business," he told *SHRM Online*. "Companies that have been successful provide outcomes-based training and not activities that do not change behavior."

Changing behavior is easier said than done, experts noted.

"Bias is stubborn, deeply rooted and not easily swayed, particularly in a two-hour to two-day training session," said Donna Flagg, founder of The Krysalis Group, a business and management consulting firm in New York City. "It does set the tone within a company for what is acceptable and not acceptable behavior. But in terms of 'training' people to be more aware and sensitive, it depends on each individual person's ability to let go of his or her beliefs. Those who are mature and open to growing will be positively affected by this type of training, and those who are not won't be," she told *SHRM Online*.

"Attitudes to diversity are more often than not driven by implicit associations ... an unconsciously

inbuilt habit or way of thinking,” explained Andy Habermacher, CEO of ctp, a training company in Switzerland, and managing director of NeuroBusiness Group, an international collaborative group of neuroscientists, coaches, leadership developers and senior managers. “A workshop or lecture of any duration will therefore have little impact on this internal ‘wiring,’ ” he told *SHRM Online*.

For example, when the brain “hooks onto an idea” it looks for evidence to support that idea and tends to ignore evidence to the contrary, Habermacher explained. “This is all done below the conscious level.” Diversity training should therefore address the concept of unconscious decision-making and how it influences thoughts and behavior, he said.

“This is not to say that the concept of awareness cannot make a difference,” Habermacher added. “Superficially it will, and it can stimulate the change process. Yet to change the wiring requires much, much more.”

### **Trainers, Be Prepared**

Pegine Echevarria, author and owner of Team Pegine, a Florida-based diversity consultancy, said a trainer’s level of preparation can make or break diversity training.

Mark F. Kluger, a partner with Mandelbaum Salsburg PC in West Orange, N.J., said it is important to set the stage early in the session. “The most important element to make the training take hold is to immediately diffuse the inherent defensiveness that sets in from the outset,” he said. “Most participants assume that they are going to be lectured to, talked down to, challenged and, most importantly, judged. It is critical to let them know that this is not the goal of diversity training and is in fact counterproductive.”

With 15 years of diversity training experience under his belt, Kluger said he tends to be blunt. “I start by asking for a show of hands as to how many in the group are bigots,” he told *SHRM Online*. “I rarely get any takers. I then ask how many racists are in the room. There are usually some nervous smiles but rarely any hands. I move on to how many in this room are prejudiced. Then a few hands go up, but often tentatively. Finally, I ask ‘How many of you have prejudices?’ and if that does not get them all, I change the word to ‘biases’ and then everyone seems on board,” he said.

Kluger said that because everyone has prejudices and biases, the purpose of the training is for individuals to understand their prejudices so they can leave them home when they go to work. “I often tell the groups I train that I couldn’t care less about what they think and why they think it,” he explained. “My intention is not to change their minds about any of their values or views. I do, however, care about what they say and how they act at work.”

Making sure everyone in the room is an equal participant in—and beneficiary of—the training is essential, experts agreed.

“Too often, diversity training can make workers feel slighted because of who they are and the protected categories that they are in,” said Julie A. Moore, founder of Employment Practices Group, a Massachusetts-based consulting firm. “We all have a gender, a skin color, a religion, et cetera. Be sure to emphasize that all workers belong to one or more protected categories, and they are all equally important.”

**Jared A. Jacobson, a Philadelphia-based employment attorney, said trainers should be careful not to:**

- **Focus comments, examples and hypothetical situations on some groups of individuals, to the obvious exclusion of the others.**
- **Use outdated examples of inappropriate behavior.**
- **Be overly serious or use too much “legalese.” Diversity training should be fun and**

**memorable, he said, as well as informative.**

**And he noted that trainers need to be prepared for employees to share comments and examples of their own that might be offensive to others.**

"Diversity trainers must understand that what they do, how they do it and the words they use can impact negatively or positively the productivity and engagement of the employees they teach," Echevarria said. "It is critical that diversity training communicates to individuals that they are respected, valued and appreciated and that their unique qualities drive innovation, increase profits and engage others."

### **A Rose by Any Other Name?**

Rachael A. Akohonae, global head of diversity and inclusion and head of employee relations for BNP Paribas, one of the largest banks in the world, said she learned the hard way that billing a program as "diversity training" could impact the enthusiasm with which the event is received.

"When we rolled out mandatory diversity training for managers last year, you could almost hear the eyes rolling," she told *SHRM Online*. "Although I had good attendance, I could hardly call any of our businesspeople enthusiastic participants."

But that changed when participants learned that the training would focus on building inclusive leadership skills: "I had immediate buy-in," she said. "In hindsight, I never should have called it 'diversity training'—it was a rookie mistake."

When Akohonae re-branded the program as "A Seminar on Inclusive Leadership," she noted, she had "much better engagement and interest from our business managers."

*Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR, is an online editor/manager for SHRM.*