

## ENABLERS AND BARRIERS TO DIVERSITY

### WHAT FACTORS SUPPORT AND INHIBIT POSITIVE CHANGE?

Understanding the factors that move organizational diversity forward--or hold it back--can make the difference between success or failure. Diversity Initiative evaluators twice asked organizations (first in 1992, then four years later) to identify enablers and barriers that had a significant impact on their diversity efforts. The responses represent hard-earned lessons and offer firsthand advice for any organization committed to achieving diversity. Organizations might think of them as a checklist of do's and don'ts for successful diversity efforts, bearing in mind, however, that each organization will have a unique definition of diversity and each diversity initiative will have its own set of challenges and accomplishments. Organizational leadership should plan periodic opportunities to celebrate progress, to acknowledge struggles and to recommit to diversity goals.

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### ENABLERS

**Commitment by board and top management:** Direct personal involvement of board members and top managers is essential at every phase of diversity work and the ability to articulate why diversity is beneficial to the organization is a litmus test for leadership. The commitment of top leaders energizes an organization, provides momentum during slow periods and increases the likelihood of lasting change.

**Prior experience:** Promoting diversity on an organization-wide basis is a complex undertaking. Organizations that have previously launched organization-wide efforts are most aware of the commitment of time and personnel that is required. Organizations should realize that achieving diversity is a long-term process and should set realistic goals and expectations.

**Needs assessment and planning:** An effective written plan for achieving greater diversity grows out of a careful assessment of an organization's current staffing, board representation and policies as they relate to diversity. For even the most committed organizations, it is important to lay the groundwork for a successful process by examining areas of need and developing a definition of diversity that the organization can embrace as an achievable goal.

**Assigned staff member:** Continuity and leadership are critical components of successful diversity initiatives. A specific staff person must fulfill the role of diversity coordinator and oversee all stages of an organization's diversity-related activities. Whether or not the coordinator is a manager, he or she must have the full support of the board and management. The role of diversity coordinator becomes part of this person's job description and must be considered in concert with the person's other responsibilities.

**Diversity committee:** The most effective diversity committees take a task-oriented approach to planning and implementing diversity activities. Each member of the committee can play a catalytic role by advocating for diversity within their individual departments, advising the diversity coordinator, sharing the workload and assuming a position of power and authority to make recommendations to management and the board.

**Broad involvement:** The opportunity to become a member of the diversity committee should be offered to everyone within the organization. To create a sense of ownership and commitment to the diversity process and its outcome, the committee should include a broad cross-section of employees and at least one board member. Periodic thought and discussion about length of service and infusion of new members will help avoid burnout and keep the committee intact even if there is turnover in personnel.

**Consultants:** Consultants work most effectively when they function in partnership with an organization to plan and implement diversity work. In addition, consultants can bring objectivity and efficiency to the diversity efforts by undertaking associated tasks, such as conducting an organization-wide diversity assessment.

**Resources:** The board must be willing to allocate the funding needed to make diversity efforts successful. Realistic planning also should accommodate staff time for diversity committee meetings, organization-wide activities, and the diversity coordinator's responsibilities.

**Training:** Diversity training for staff and board should be tailored to address specific needs and issues that are identified through a diversity assessment. By exploring differences among individuals, successful training can lead to greater understanding of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity, which in turn can improve interactions among staff and prompt changes in attitudes and behavior.

**Focus on cultural competence:** A focus on culturally competent behavior-how various cultures express anger, authority, greet others and communicate-helps people in the workplace gain understanding and skills needed to establish and sustain a diverse workforce.

**Changes in attitude:** Whether prompted by training or other factors, changes in attitude are a precursor to changes in behavior.

**Effective communication:** Memos and newsletters are especially helpful vehicles to make sure that timely and ongoing communication regarding diversity efforts reaches all levels of an organization. They also create opportunities for the diversity committee to receive feedback.

**Efforts to recruit and retain a diverse workforce, volunteers, vendors:** An organization's commitment to diversity is underscored by active and systematic efforts to recruit, hire and retain individuals from a variety of racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Seeking delivery of goods and services from minority-

and women-owned businesses adds an additional level of commitment within operations.

Changes in policy: Changes in policies regarding such issues as recruitment and hiring will lead to more diversity within an organization. Acknowledgement of discriminatory or less than inclusive practices is the first step in the process of change.

Change in the community: Changes in the social and demographic characteristics of the communities it serves can provide strong motivation for an organization to change as well. Through a diversity initiative, an organization has the opportunity to become genuinely reflective of the populations it serves and may therefore increase overall effectiveness in the delivery of its programming.

## BARRIERS

Organizational culture and inertia: An organization with a history of accomplishment and excellence may find it difficult to acknowledge lack of diversity as a shortcoming and to take the steps needed to achieve diversity. Often the smokescreen raised in these situations is "compromising quality." Lack of board and management involvement and support: Involvement of top leadership is essential for successful diversity efforts. Without this involvement, diversity efforts are on a weak footing within the organization and progress is difficult to achieve and is often transitory.

Staffing: Similarly, it is almost impossible to implement diversity efforts without sufficient and consistent staffing.

Definition of diversity: Without a careful--and inclusive--definition of diversity some employees or volunteers may perceive that they are excluded and may resist or oppose the diversity efforts.

Unsuitable consultants: A poor fit between the style of the consultant and the culture of the organization weakens the consultancy. Individuals with inappropriate skills, or who lack enough experience, will not be effective. A consultant whose experience base is with large for-profit corporations may not be appropriate for a community-based non-profit organization.

Over dependence on consultants: Too much reliance on consultants can diminish an organization's ownership of, involvement in, and commitment to the diversity process.

Organizational complexity: Reaching and involving employees can be difficult for organizations with a large number of workers in a variety of different roles and settings.

Difficulty getting staff involved: Heavy work loads and many competing demands on time make it difficult to secure staff involvement in diversity work.

**Resistance:** Resistance to diversity often arises when individuals feel that their power or privilege are threatened. It is critical to identify areas of resistance and address the fears and issues from which it arises. If not resolved, resistance can make it difficult to effect true change within an organization and to institutionalize that change into policy and practice.

**Turnover:** Turnover creates the challenge of familiarizing new staff and board members with diversity efforts and securing their commitment.

**Funding:** Budget cut-backs, loss of staff due to layoffs, and conflict over diminishing resources create friction and loss of morale. Moreover, participants may question the importance of diversity work when an organization faces serious financial problems.

**Poorly planned training:** Poorly planned training can create more problems than solutions. Large group sessions can be particularly counterproductive if difficult issues are raised without allowing sufficient opportunities for follow-up, feedback, and resolution of those issues. The consultant's expertise in diversity work and skill in managing group dynamics are critical.

**Oppression model:** When diversity training is based solely on identifying and addressing one group's oppression of another the outcome may lead to divisiveness and confusion that will very likely block progress.

**Language and cultural difference:** Differences in language and culture can make communication difficult and lead to discomfort and misunderstanding . Without systematic efforts to assure good communication, problems can often arise.

**Unions:** Acknowledgement of a union presence and influence at the outset is crucial to achieving success. If the union's perspective is not represented on the diversity committee or is not incorporated into the committee's work, diversity efforts, particularly with regard to personnel policy and practice, may be more challenging than they need be. If employees are represented by a labor union, the union officers or rank and file members should be involved in discussions of diversity to be sure that the plans and policies are developed with respect to the collective bargaining agreement.

**Burnout:** Diversity work requires substantial effort, and rewards are not always immediately obvious. Without board involvement of staff and significant leadership and support from top management and the board, the potential for burnout is very high.

**Success itself:** Change can be threatening for individuals and for organizations as a whole. Organizations that participate in any change process without regular assessments and communication may be set up for failure.