

The importance of training in diversity management

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Diversity training is an essential part of building awareness and a cohesive work environment.

It has been clearly shown that well-managed, diverse teams outperform homogeneous teams, as they tend to be more creative and effective at problem-solving.

However, when diverse teams are not managed well, communication and trust can break down, resulting in lower performance. But why should organisations care about managing diversity? The answer is simple.

Tourism organisations can be motivated to incorporate diversity management practices which would enable them to create an inclusive and harmonious environment, in turn enhancing their reputation with job seekers; in this way, they can employ and retain the best talent, while attracting business from various cultural groups.

Employees who feel included, valued and rewarded are more engaged and motivated.

In a worldwide survey of three million employees on diversity, employee satisfaction and organisational performance, it was found that creating an inclusive and harmonious environment was a key driver in employee engagement and commitment.

Greater employee engagement leads to reduced turnover. A 2008 study by Gallup Management Group in the US revealed that engaged employees had 51 per cent lower turnover, on average.

Diversity training is the centrepiece of diversity management; it challenges ingrained biases and is the primary driver of change in organisational culture. A workplace benefits from diversity training by having employees letting their guards down and building healthy business relationships, as well as decreasing bullying and discrimination. Therefore, diversity training is to be seen as the cornerstone of any diversity initiative and will be a natural part of an organisational programme with diversity management strategy.

As such, diversity training is a critical component of the present and future success and growth of any organisation's business strategy.

However, it holds especially true in tourism organisations where having a diverse workforce and client base is unavoidable.

When a company or organisation decides to implement diversity training into its workplace culture, it must take proactive steps to ensure that diversity initiatives are seen as opportunities to improve the overall productivity of the company and its employees in a bias-free, diverse workplace.

Fundamental to the success of diversity training is the inclusion and participation of all employees in the diversity-training process. It is important to recognise that certain individuals or groups within an organisation may be resistant to change because they perceive a diversity initiative as a direct threat to their status and power.

The following four steps can be incorporated into the initial discussion when diversity training is first broached:

- Employers must communicate clearly to their employees the expectations about appropriate workplace conduct that supports policies and values statements.

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- Structuring work teams so they are ethnically, racially and gender-balanced will aid employees in dismantling stereotypes and assumptions, by exposing them to these realities.

Managers who effectively supervise a diverse employee pool and client base and employees who work well with people of varying backgrounds should be recognised and rewarded. This creates a level of accountability.

- Commitment to diversity must be clearly demonstrated at the highest levels of the company.

- Managing diversity requires the use of several sets of skills: communication, cross-cultural competency, critical thinking, conflict management and problem-solving. Cultural diversity training also includes developing the capacity to identify and empathise with the beliefs, values and customs of others.

The implementation of a diversity management-training programme incorporates these skills and an educational component that allows participants to address issues of prejudice, discrimination and biased behaviours that could impact employee and client relations.

The purpose of training is not only to increase awareness of workplace diversity, but also to develop and enhance skills among employees to help them communicate more profoundly in the future.

Although diversity training cannot altogether change individuals' beliefs, it has the ability to increase awareness, impart knowledge and educate employees further on how to accept differences among fellow employees. The main goal of a successful diversity training programme is to create a positive work environment by helping employees recognise, be tolerant of, and accept differences among co-workers.

Unfortunately, diversity training programmes can fail for several reasons. Firstly, because they are viewed as simply the latest HR fad or because an outside agency recommends that they implement a diversity programme. In fact, the majority of programmes will eventually fail unless the impetus to create a diversity programme comes from inside, rather than from external parties.

Secondly, organisations may fail to implement diversity programmes that are custom-made for their needs. Organisations cannot simply choose an off-the-shelf generic programme, not tailored to their organisational structure or corporate culture.

When employees feel the material is not relevant to their job, many will simply see the training programme as a waste of time.

Finally, diversity programmes fall short when organisations simply provide training but fail to provide the resources needed to implement

changes. For diversity training programmes to be more successful in the future, a sustainable action plan needs to be formulated instead of just a haphazard approach to diversity training.

There are several factors crucial for a diversity training programme to succeed in the 21st century. First, the most important factor deals with obtaining top-level leadership support from the organisation. For a diversity programme to succeed, it requires the enthusiastic support and involvement of top management, who must clearly articulate the importance of diversity as a business value and goal.

The diversity programme needs to be tied in directly with the mission and objectives of the organisation. If the training programme fails to stay in line with the important values of the organisation, employees will lose interest and become non-responsive to changing their behaviour following training.

Finally, the organisation needs to research and conduct an adequate needs assessment to ensure the training material coincides with current diversity issues within the organisation. Failure to keep abreast of the major diversity issues in the organisation will cause employees to lose faith in the overall purpose of the diversity training programme. Taking the time to appreciate the diversity of each employee in an organisation will help produce a confident and committed workforce.

For this purpose, the Malta Tourism Authority recently embarked on a new EU-funded project entitled Retaining and Attracting People Within Tourism Through Diversity Management (ESF 2.78. Operational Programme II Cohesion Policy 2007-2013).

The aim of this project is to identify the issues affecting the employability of the workers within the tourism industry by addressing retention and recruitment challenges. This has been supported through a set of research studies, a training programme and an online interactive resource portal, all focusing on the concept of diversity management and aimed at aiding practitioners in their tourism management fields.

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