

## Diversity and Leadership

**Diversity is an essential tool for success in any workplace. By accommodating different perspectives, your organization can increase commitment and loyalty.**

Creativity and innovation are essential to all organizations. A diverse workplace can set the stage for creative and innovative approaches to manufacturing, service delivery or business solutions via the richness of employees' life and work experiences. All these elements make diversity not just something that is nice to have, but an essential tool for success in local and global markets.

Diversity can mean many things in this context: people working beyond age 65, women holding senior management positions, ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities, and even people from non-traditional educational backgrounds or non-linear career paths.

***By 2011, 100% of Canada's net labour market will depend on immigration. The labour market in the Greater Toronto Area is already dependent on immigration.***

The challenge faced by organizations is to capture the energy produced by these diverse teams and to do this in a manner that is meaningful for their businesses. In recent years, organizations have taken a number of steps to promote diversity in the workplace, including diversity awareness training, increasing the number and types of network groups, coaching initiative programs, and working towards creative solutions to accommodate requests for flexible working arrangements. Unfortunately, ongoing measurement of the effectiveness of these initiatives and programs too often drops off the radar screen.

Many organizations see diversity in a limited way, and don't go beyond the focus of recruiting people from minority groups. This is not enough! Successful companies seek not only to accommodate different perspectives, but also to restructure their organizations by listening to these new voices so that the whole culture changes.

***Lack of recognition of qualifications and experience—an all too common phenomenon for immigrants—costs Canada an estimated \$4 to 6 billion per year.***

By focusing solely on recruitment, organizations run the risk of losing new employees to more diversity-friendly workplaces. Industry, to say nothing of our broader society, cannot afford to be risk-averse and reticent when employing new methods of workplace design. For example, we must recognize that women may bring to the table experiences and skills gained while raising children, or that individuals with disabilities may offer unique perspectives fostered by learning to cope with everyday activities.

***72% of skilled immigrants in Ontario hold a university degree. Six out of ten immigrants are forced to make a downward shift into a career or job other than the one they are qualified for.***

One solution is to make sure leaders actively listen to minority individuals through two-way relationships such as mentoring or coaching. Networking groups (which should include some of the organization's leaders) can also uncover employees' concerns and issues, and provide feedback to the organization. Focus groups are also rich sources of information. Real listening is necessary in order to fully understand commonalities and differences and to prevent the development of micro-inequalities and overt discrimination.

The views of all employees should shape organizational design. To enable employees the ability to reach their full potential, everyone must have access to training and promotional opportunities. As a result, leaders from all backgrounds will emerge. Leadership will then begin to truly reflect the workforce, and as more diverse role models are established, the organizational culture will evolve. This is an important message that can be communicated to all stakeholders.

Fostering diversity is a survival skill! Why? Because there is no other way to accurately capture the nature and scope of today's complex organizational problems. We cannot create a true picture of the whole culture or make sound decisions if we do not respect the fact that we each see something different because of who we are and where we exist in the system. Exploring different perspectives also


brings people closer together, and for an organization this means working collaboratively towards common objectives. Actively listening to opinions makes people feel valued, and this leads to commitment and loyalty.

Organizations can no longer rely on the tools and techniques that management used in the past. They just do not suit the new, emerging business models

or our increasingly knowledge-based workforce. We need a more collaborative style of management, and not the paternalistic command-and-control style preferred in the past.

Statistics quoted in this newsletter are sourced from the Toronto Region Immigration Employment Council (TRIEC) website: <http://www.triec.ca>.

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*"Everything changes ..... Everyone has potential"*