Advancing Diversity Training

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Abstract

Diversity training sessions have become a mainstay in professional life as a way to address concerns surrounding bias and discrimination. However, evidence supporting their effectiveness is limited at best, and indeed sometimes unintended negative outcomes can result. Drawing from the literatures on education, sociology, and psychology, we address areas where training sessions may be improved through a better understanding of how people learn. Repeated exposure of ideas, buy-in from leadership, appropriate expertise, opportunities for active engagement, and connective presentation styles (such as storytelling) are all tools available for positive change.

Bias exists. Society at large is grappling with better ways to address the systemic disparities in hiring, promotions, pay rates, and representation at the highest ranks of business, based on demographic identities (e.g., gender, race, disability status). Companies are stepping up to attempt to redress these imbalances in both formal policies and informal attitudes by offering diversity training to their employees. Nearly every Fortune 500 company has some sort of diversity training initiative, whether for EEOC compliance, Title IX, sensitivity training, or the like. There has been a clear broadening of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) topics to strive for more than just the bare minimum of avoiding lawsuits; today's training spans topics from microaggressions to bullying to anti-racism.

But do they work? Evidence for their success is limited at best.[1] The truth is, once we have an intuitive sense of something (which can lead to biases

and stereotypes), it is very difficult for logical arguments to override it.[2] Changing attitudes is hard, yet the moral imperative for doing so by improving diversity training has never been greater.

What are the limitations of diversity training?

Research has shown that short-term educational interventions don't tend to change behavior. They can exacerbate ingroup-outgroup tensions, create negative reactions in people who feel like they are being controlled,[3] and may make things worse by highlighting problems, bringing them front and center. They can even create a false sense of confidence that the problem has been fixed, which leads to ignoring future issues.[4] Similarly, in a phenomenon called "moral licensing," people may follow a moral act with more problematic behaviors, because the "good deed" has already been done and so they then feel entitled to act freely.[5] Even when training does influence change, it seems more effective at things like getting junior-level women to reach out for mentorship, rather than getting senior leaders to change their behavior.[6]

Why are we still relying on training that doesn't have the impact we seek?

With such a complicated and seemingly-intractable set of problems, one answer is that companies simply don't know what else to do. Off-the-shelf solutions are readily available. In fact, even as far back as 2003, the market for diversity efforts was $8 billion.[7] It can now cost between $25,000 and $450,000 to implement a single diversity training effort.[8] Without a better sense of how to move forward, diversity training modules are an attractive and accessible option.

Better solutions are daunting, even aside from the expense. They require more investment in time, capital, and personnel, and may be potentially polarizing in the workplace. Finally, it bears mentioning that while many can espouse the language of equity, there may not be a true desire to upend the status quo, both because of general resistance to change and perceptions of personal threat.

To get some sense of how these training sessions are being received, we surveyed 100 professionals about their recent experiences with diversity training. Of these, 80% reported that the training was company-mandated. There was a split response overall, with some finding the sessions boring, boiler-plate, standard, and uninteresting, whereas others found them more engaging and well-researched. This begs the question, what works and what doesn't?

Leveraging research on attitude change

Decades of research in education, psychology, and sociology have offered insights into what it takes to change someone's mind. Below are a few ideas that may help guide the future of diversity training.

1. Nothing you do only once is going to have a tremendous impact. Learning over time (called distributed learning) is known to be more effective than learning all at once (massed learning).[9] Memory is improved if information is presented in smaller segments, because it has a better chance of being consolidated and stored. The truth is, we often resist ideas the first time we hear them. As revisited ideas have a chance to settle in and become familiar, they are more easily adopted. Repeated exposure is also beneficial for both learning and attitude change. According to the *mere exposure effect*, repeated experience with an idea increases our sense of truth and liking,[10] a mechanism adopted by advertisers in their attempts to have their products and messages come before our eyes as often as possible.

In our survey, 72% of the employees reported that the training took place entirely in one session, though many made it clear that they would have preferred the training to be broken into shorter classes or even bite-sized sessions across multiple days. Many companies already use this approach for safety compliance training or hazardous material handling, for example, so there's precedent for this type of delivery.

2. Internal leadership is needed for creating connection and legitimacy, but this needs to be balanced with DEIA expertise. Top-level buy in is crucial. It can also help provide customized solutions that speak directly to the organization's past and present. One survey respondent specifically referred to "the CEO's commitment" as the single most effective part of the training they received. However, within our survey, for every respondent who appreciated hearing from the leaders in their own company, there was another who noted that the internal leaders were the wrong choice for the job and were out of their depth trying to tackle these sensitive topics. Their comments included:

- "Most of it was just my managers and a few people in HR talking…[it wasn't very] engaging"
- "It was a ppt. We scrolled."
- "I felt like no one was qualified to be talking about cultural inclusivity."
- "It mostly just felt like a PR stunt or a way to save face. It was mandatory, and the supervisors conducting the training seemed as

uninterested as everyone else. There were some surprising facts but overall it was mostly just awkward and unhelpful."

On the other hand, external diversity trainers were considered more qualified and experienced in managing these discussions, including comments such as:

- "The inclusion of an outside source for the presentation gave the presenter more credibility."
- "The trainers created a safe space where everyone could speak their mind."
- "The trainer was engaging and constantly asking questions and involving the staff which made it easier to follow along with."

And indeed, expert voices are generally given more credence, not just because they have more wisdom to offer but also because signals of authority in and of themselves are persuasive.[11]

Finally, the novelty of having multiple speakers can also benefit learning. Through a process called *habituation*, neurons stop firing when exposed to the same stimulus repeatedly but reactivate when exposed to something novel. In other words, we get bored hearing the same voice. One survey respondent highlighted this very idea by saying they would prefer "a variety of presenters to come in and talk about their experiences to get a wider range of deliveries" and noted that a mix of voices would be preferred.

The recent proliferation of the high-level Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) role combines these two ideas: (1) the legitimacy of having a person within the company in charge of making progress on these topics and (2) a chance to bring in the needed expertise from outside the existing organization. Postings for Diversity and Inclusion jobs have multiplied year after year, with sharp increases starting in 2016.[12] While these positions seem like promising avenues forward, their high turnover speaks to the difficulty of getting this right. Goal clarity, resources, and organizational support are needed from all levels to make it work.[13]

3. Active learning outperforms passive learning. Processes like perspective-taking and goal-setting allow for engagement with ideas in a way that observing lessons on a video or hearing a lecture do not.[14,15] The more specific the actions asked of people, the more likely they are to create new habits that stick. When asked what was most memorable and effective about the training they had experienced, our survey respondents reported that activities requiring engagement including role plays, scenarios, discussions, games, and even quizzes, made the session better. Though only 43% of respondents had any active element as part of their training, all but one of those reported that it was the single most valuable thing in the whole

training. Similarly, those without active components were twice as likely to report that training was not engaging, and were disproportionately likely to write negative comments about the training overall.

4. The more personal, the better. People learn from stories. While we intuitively understand that a story is going to be more engaging than a dry set of facts, we may not appreciate just how vivid and unforgettable stories are on a cognitive level.[16] For one thing, stories tend to use more descriptive and sensory words which activate more regions of the brain and create stronger memories. They also tend to be more original, which is more engaging. In addition, the human brain is hard-wired to search for cause-and-effect relationships, and stories are full of these linkages. Finally, there's empathy: the ability to put yourself in the shoes of another person creates insights on a much deeper level. Empathy also fosters rapport, which helps people open their minds to change. One respondent specifically commented that hearing stories from those within their company made them care much more. (Note that even the desire for personal anecdotes can be complicated, as historically marginalized minorities may be put under pressure, even if unintentionally, to share their experiences.[17])

Effective diversity trainers, like effective speakers in any domain, capitalize on this opportunity and bring themselves into the discussion. One survey respondent noted the lack of this type of connection by wishing that their training was "less stuffy and bureaucratic. A lot of the training felt like it lacked any sense of life or ownership from the presenter. They were mostly just going through the motions." Clearly, a sense of authenticity makes a difference.

The need to address issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility has come to the forefront. Instead of budgeting for the inevitable lawsuits that result from poorly-handled interactions and decisions, companies are now trying to be more proactive by consciously, systematically, and collectively addressing these issues. Training sessions are going to be a valuable part of the process, but attention needs to be paid to make sure that they are aligned with the processes that best encourage learning.

Authors

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Endnotes

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