

How to... deliver diversity training

Vivre les differences?

Diversity training has its critics, but there's no doubt it is spreading far and wide. But there are some important factors to consider if you are contemplating delivering it.



Amanda Jones,
Co-op Group



Alick Miskin,
Grass Roots



Penny Tamkin,
Institute for
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Services



Richard
Wilkes,
Steps Drama

High-profile cases such as the Lawrence Enquiry and this year's *Celebrity Big Brother* have raised awareness of diversity issues, making it a hot topic for organisations to address. Both legally and ethically, providing appropriate training is no longer an area that many employers can afford to ignore. But where do you start, and how far do you need to take it?

Penny Tamkin, associate director at the Institute for Employment Services, says the first step is to collate data on the diversity of the workforce and identify whether discrimination is taking place.

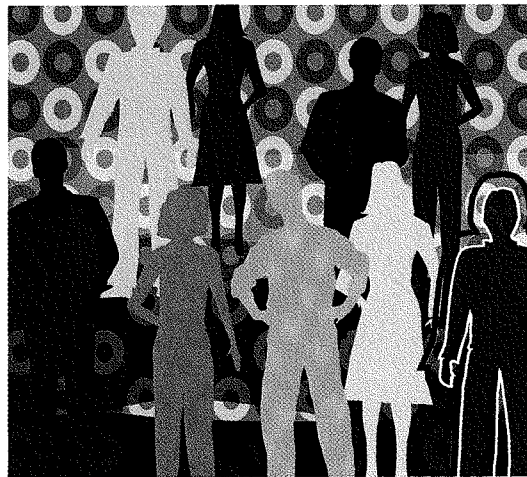
"Before delivering diversity training, work out if you have a problem," she says. "Collate data on areas such as grievances, absence and promotions, and see if groups are singled out. If you do a random sheep dip without understanding what training you need to focus on, it won't be effective."

Ethnic profile

There are no sector-specific needs, but training should reflect the ethnic profile of the workforce and customers served.

Much diversity training is knowledge-based to help staff understand different belief systems and dispel myths associated with race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or age. These are all sensitive areas that have to be addressed tactfully, which is why some employers shy away from delivering training themselves, instead opting for external trainers.

If delivering training in-house, it is essential to hit the right balance. "If training is too sophisticated in a workforce where there is little diversity, staff may feel it is not relevant. But equally,



if the company is very diverse, taking a simplistic approach may cause offence," Tamkin warns. "You need to pitch training so you can challenge staff, without overloading them with so much information they stop listening."

Alick Miskin, head of diversity at training provider Grass Roots, says that all diversity training should be built on good, accurate, referenced information. "Challenge assumptions, such as half the country's population is made up of immigrants. People need these facts if they are to fully understand diversity issues at work," he says.

E-learning can be an effective way to get this knowledge across and to test staff, especially in larger organisations, where classroom training could prove too time-consuming and costly. "If a company has thousands of employees, this is

the only way to do it," says Miskin. "Once you assess staff through e-learning, you can then pick up those that need further training. You can never pre-judge what people know – so find out."

Richard Wilkes is account director at Steps Drama, which delivers diversity training by using performers to act out specific scenarios and getting delegates to give their views on how situations should be handled. He says that this provides the right environment for a much wider debate on diversity, and clients include all types of organisations.

"Some diversity issues can be quite abstract, and those grey areas can be hard to address in a training environment," he says. "We open a debate and link diversity into the everyday workings of the business. After presenting a dilemma, the delegates work out the best way forward and then challenge their assumptions."

Targeted solution

According to Wilkes, this approach provides a more targeted solution. "Because we research the organisation beforehand, we tailor the scenarios to the particular issues affecting them. It's amazing how many managers suddenly realise why some employees may feel excluded."

Other interactive exercises can also be useful. "Simple activities such as thinking of a word and then asking each delegate to list all the associated meanings can show how different assumptions are made. We also ask delegates to look at a photo or listen to a voice, and ask about what type of person they are, and where they come from," says Wilkes.

Diversity training, like the subject matter is, well, diverse. Even two similar-looking organisations could harbour completely different issues.

It is a complex and sensitive area, and hitting the right tone relies on some heavy-duty data gathering. A growing number of external providers now offer expert advice and courses. If erring on the side of caution, this is one training area where it could pay to let a third-party provider help find your way.

by Kirstie Redford

CASE STUDY: CO-OP GROUP

The Co-op Group includes food, travel, financial, pharmaceutical and farming businesses, and has 55,000 staff. The firm's head of diversity, Amanda Jones, wanted to deliver diversity training that could cover issues specific to different parts of the organisation.

She brought in Steps Drama, which designed a number of different scenarios relevant to specific parts of the business. "Watching the actors and being asked to give opinions on what they should do in different scenarios was fun, and people

remember and refer to it," she says. Steps also created a video that could be used to cascade the same messages down to the rest of the staff.

Importantly, this training has spurred other in-house diversity activities, such as regular workshops. "These have been really important. They update on legal issues and allow people to talk in a safe environment. Managers can then build individual action plans. Using Steps has triggered further diversity training and created greater staff engagement with diversity," says Jones.

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