

Analysis • Week 43

Diversity Training: What Does and Doesn't Work

Does diversity training work? Well, it depends. We unpack what effective diversity training looks like.

By Elle Mason

December 11th, 2019 08:16AM EST



Photo by iStock

The diversity and inclusion industry is massive. It's estimated that American companies alone spend \$8 billion annually on diversity training. Data from just one diversity consulting firm estimates D&I training support can range from \$25,000 to \$450,000 a year.

For many companies, training is the go-to method for increasing diversity and inclusion internally. We saw this recently with both Sephora and Starbucks, two companies that instituted mandatory anti-bias training—at least for their US employees—after widely-publicized incidents involving discrimination.

But is training effective?

Many say no.

Some report that mandatory training and similar “control tactics” simply cause employees and managers to want to rebel.

Others say training efforts that talk too much about stereotyping can actually “let people off the hook” and increase bias.

But an increasing body of research suggests that, implemented well, diversity training can be an effective tool for combating bias.

The “how” matters

Most researchers and practitioners agree that design and execution matter. For example, discussing stereotypes can have a positive impact when framed as: “We all stereotype, and let’s work on resisting those subconscious urges.”

According to the most recent research, trainings that are both effective and engaging are:

Voluntary: While mandatory training has been shown to spark resistance or even animosity, voluntary training evokes the opposite response (“I chose to show up, so I must be pro-diversity”). But there’s a caveat: it can be common for those most in need of training to opt-out, ultimately hindering its effectiveness. So leaders should find ways to encourage full participation without mandating it.

Use a variety of methods: Although a number of training methods (including online and lecture-style training) have demonstrated effectiveness, using a mixture of

training methods, like exercises, group activities, and discussions, has been demonstrated to elicit a more positive response from participants, which can ultimately lead to their continued willingness and engagement.

Over a significant length of time: Unsurprisingly, one-hour trainings are not shifting paradigms. The most effective trainings are longer and continuous. Researchers attribute this to the fact that longer programs provide more opportunities to engage with the learning material and practice important skills.

Part of a larger initiative: Combining training with other diversity and inclusion-building practices like active recruitment initiatives, diversity task forces, and formal mentoring programs creates more beneficial and tangible outcomes for an organization. In other words, for an organization that's looking to make progress on D&I, a "set it and forget it" model won't suffice. Training should be one part of an overall initiative to not only inform and educate – but to hire, promote and advance diverse candidates and employees.

Intent matters too

Trainings often have different desired outcomes. Some trainings focus on shifting thoughts and beliefs (often called unconscious bias training). Some trainings focus on changing behaviors. Meta-studies have shown that the most effective trainings leverage both...and that both types of training are more effective when done together than separately.

Research has also found that specific training techniques are particularly useful in achieving these outcomes. To shift thoughts and beliefs, training that incorporates perspective-taking is an effective tool. Taking on the perspective of others can have a positive long-term impact on positive behaviors towards diverse groups by "increasing the internal motivation to respond without prejudice" and may be particularly impactful for participants who are less empathetic towards others.

And for changing both belief and behavior, you might incorporate [goal-setting](#). Integrating goal-setting within diversity training means asking participants to set and meet goals around specific pro-social or supportive behaviors towards diverse groups. This technique has been demonstrated to shift both behaviors and attitudes over time.

Technology can help.

Virtual and augmented reality companies are addressing the notion of perspective-taking head-on by designing training and experiences that allow users to better understand the experiences of marginalized groups.

[Praxis Labs](#), for example, aims to “increase empathy, reduce bias and encourage users to adopt more inclusive behaviors by providing first-person perspective-taking experiences alongside research-backed curriculum and metrics.”

In a similar vein, companies like [Perspectives](#) are offering technology that “trains social instincts to identify micro-aggressions.” And a number of projects in the [Stanford Virtual Human Interaction Lab](#) use augmented and virtual reality to examine racism, ageism and empathy.

For leaders who want to create an integrated approach, technology has applications beyond training. Other companies are [developing solutions](#) to address diversity efforts within talent acquisition, engagement, advancement and analytics – for example, reducing bias in job ads and recruitment efforts, and collecting more robust and actionable data about current employee experiences.

Looking ahead

Ultimately, the effectiveness of training will depend on approach, motivation and intent. In order to determine how well it works, leaders should define their

intended outcomes. In recent years, this has been in the areas of changing beliefs and changing behaviors.

The next step is to measure the impact of those changes and to evaluate diversity and inclusion initiative effectiveness by measuring how much more diverse, equitable and inclusive an organization has actually become.



Elle Mason

Contributor

Elle Mason is a professional management consultant and the founder of **Better Living with Design**—a resource for integrating positive psychology and organizational science into the home and workplace. She has studied psychology, education and management at the University of North Carolina, Johns Hopkins University and Harvard University and has consulted in the human capital space for almost a decade.

We want to hear from you!

D&I In Practice wants your feedback so we can deliver the content you need to move the needle forward on diversity and inclusion. Please send comments, questions and ideas for stories you'd love to see to editor@diinpractice.com.

Recommended Stories

Newsletter • Week 43

December 11, 2019

Diversity training can get a bad rap. Sometimes deservedly. We look at the research on what does and doesn't work. Looking at this week's Away controversy from a D&I perspective. Tips from eBay's Chief Diversity Officer. A report on how corporate diversity initiatives are failing black Americans.

By Terra Terwilliger

December 11th, 2019 07:00PM EST

Analysis • Week 39

Talking 'Bout the Next Generation

What does Generation Z want from an employer? Plenty, and a clear commitment to D&I is at the top of the list.

By Miya Ward

November 7th, 2019 03:19PM EST

**Analysis • Week 38**

How to Create a Psychologically Safe Workplace

Psychological safety is a buzzword these days. But what does it really mean? And how do you get there from here?

By Elle Mason

October 30th, 2019 07:21PM EDT



[Terms of Service](#) · [Privacy Policy](#) · [Subscription Policy](#)