

Workplaces thrive by promoting inclusion

November 2, 2007

Jennifer Swanberg, PhD

Issues of diversity, discrimination and disrespect are hot topics in our local media of late. Most of the discussions have focused on race as the primary form of diversity. While this is understandable, the time is ripe for all of us to consider how diversity plays out within our lives and to broaden our perspective on diversity. As a researcher who focuses on organizational culture, workplace practice and work-life effectiveness, I consider diversity from another perspective — one of inclusion. Specifically, what are the most effective ways a workplace can develop a culture that is inclusive of diverse populations?

In his Herald—Leader op-ed piece on October 22, Reverend Louis Coleman, executive director of Louisville's Justice Resource Center, considers a diverse and inclusive organization one that has African Americans represented in senior positions. His assertion holds true for other forms of diversity as well. Research conducted by the Families and Work Institute implies that workplaces with the most family-friendly cultures are those organizations that have people of diverse races, ethnic backgrounds and genders represented on their senior leadership teams.

Inclusion, in its most obvious form, suggests people from various ethnic and racial backgrounds and both genders are proportionally represented within all ranks of a workplace. While this is still a challenge to achieve in many workplaces, there are other less obvious aspects of diversity and inclusion that receive even less attention, including age diversity and caregiving responsibilities.

Workforce age differences

Does your workplace adhere to policies or practices that imply that, once an employee turns a certain age, it is time to retire? Such policies fail to take into account that individual workers have unique career trajectories. For instance, women of the baby boom generation may have delayed the start of their career or have taken time off to raise a family. It is plausible that at age 60, some women may be approaching the peak of their career. Adhering to outdated policies that require an employee to retire at a set age is detrimental to the employee and to the organization.

How is your workplace handling the demands of the younger generation, men and women alike, who demand work-life balance? Is productivity synonymous with face time at your place of employment? That is, does the culture imply that an employee who puts in longer work hours is more committed to his/her job than one who does not? Younger workers who are grouped into either the "Millennial" or "Generation Y" category want to be challenged and work hard. However, they want a life outside of their job. Without balance, they will walk.

Caregiver discrimination

Successful workplaces are organizations that create opportunities for employees to grow and develop. But what happens when an employee does not want to take a coveted promotion because it means relocating to another community or working more hours? Within some organizations, employees who opt out of a promotion for work-life balance put their careers at risk. If employees consistently refuse promotion opportunities, they may never again have that opportunity and may be perceived as not committed to the company. Requiring employees to relocate with two weeks notice or sustain endless weeks of long hours may have worked during a time when men were the primary breadwinners and women followed behind with their families. However, such practices now create significant conflicts for working men and women, especially, because in 62 percent of married-couple families, both parents work.

What if a top performer at a corporation declines a promotion several times because he does not want to take on additional responsibility due to his caring for his infirmed father? Does his seeming unwillingness to move ahead in the organization mean that he is not engaged in his job? No. It means that providing care to his parent is a priority, and that the timing of the promotion is not right. Yet, in some workplaces, the policy is up or out. Such a policy becomes especially problematic for top performers with young families or with elder care responsibilities. In essence, success in the organization is being pitted against caregiving responsibilities.

The structure and function of many jobs inherently disregard employees' caregiving responsibilities. For example, a woman aspiring to make partner status in traditional law or accounting firms is typically expected to log a significant number of billable hours. Yet, these extreme time demands may parallel her childbearing years, forcing her to make a difficult choice. She may have to decide that raising a family takes precedent over becoming partner.

Although it is illegal to discriminate against pregnant women, there are cases where women claim they were overlooked for a raise or a promotion simply because they were pregnant and planned to take three months off or wanted to return to a reduced work schedule. According to Elizabeth Grossman, an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) attorney, pregnancy discrimination case filings with the EEOC and state agencies have increased 45 percent between 1992 and 2006. Pregnancy discrimination lawsuits filed by the EEOC have risen from six or fewer per year in the 1990s to 32 in 2006.

In addition to pregnancy discrimination cases, the EEOC considers caregiving discrimination a serious enough issue that it has committed resources to better understand how the laws the agency enforces could be used to combat such cases. Discrimination against workers based on their obligation to care for children, parents and disabled family members has been termed "family responsibility discrimination." Because congress has not yet legislated protections for caregivers, statutes and common law theories have been used in family discrimination cases.

The world is more complex and diverse today than even ten years ago. At least two major cities in the United States have more residents of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds than residents from Euro-American backgrounds. Richard Florida, author of the Rise of the Creative Class, suggests that communities that embrace diversity are more likely to thrive economically and socially than cities without such pluralism. Research on family-friendly organizations clearly illustrate that diversity within senior ranks of the organization is a clear predictor of "family-friendliness." And we are learning that customers are more satisfied when they interact with store representatives who are of similar backgrounds. The facts are clear: our workplaces, communities and economy flourish when we create a climate of inclusiveness.

Jennifer E. Swanberg, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the UK College of Social Work and executive director of the of the UK Institute for Workplace Innovation.