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WORKING IN AMERICA--A MOSAIC OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The white male corporate culture is disappearing -- and the American marketplace is fast becoming a melting pot -- or even a mosaic-- of ethnic diversification. In fact, the white male share of the labor force in this country has dropped from 49 percent in 1976, to an expected ratio of less than 40 percent by the year 2000.

The share of women, Hispanics, Native Americans, Blacks, Asians, and other minorities in the workplace is so significant that hundreds of workshops have been held across the U.S. to focus on cultural differences, on-the-job conflicts between men and women as well as different ethnic groups.

While the work force is growing more slowly, employees of different backgrounds are in a position to demand more flexibility from management. In the past, conformity was the rule -- right down to the shirt color. Even now, managers may think: "To be fair, I assume that everyone is the same and treat them that way."

Right? Wrong!! Managers need to learn that men and women, as well as cultures vary in their approaches, their reactions to situations, and their perspectives.

Example: A Latino manager starts a budget-planning meeting by chatting casually and checking with his new staff on whether everyone can get together after work. His boss frets over the delay and wonders why he doesn't get straight to the pressing matters on the meeting agenda. Latino culture teaches that building relationships is often critical to working together, while the dominant American culture encourages "getting down to business."

Example: A woman employee who has a family always has another priority in her life besides her job. She may successfully juggle two careers, until her child is ill or otherwise in need of her immediate attention. To the distress of her manager, and even the resentment of her fellow employees, she changes hats to solve the immediate personal need she faces, and leaves the workplace.

Ignoring such differences can hurt people and productivity. Managers who don't understand what's motivating a colleague or employee may provoke resistance or anger, says Toby Thompkins, a consultant at Harbridge House, Inc., a Chicago-based human resources concern.

But before people can change their approach, consultants say, they have to reject a basic but wrongheaded idea. Most assume that "their human nature is everyone's human nature, and you're OK if you just get down to the human," says Barbara Deane, editor of Training and Culture Newsletter in Seattle.

Negative stereotyping is damaging, and "real and relevant differences exist, reflecting genuine cultural habits and values." At the workshops, consultants coach managers to look for and talk about these differences -- and to recognize that only through understanding and mutual respect, can we get along on and off the job.

Where management learns to comprehend and properly deal with cultural diversity, employees will be happy on the job, and the business will prosper. Personal idiosyncrasies and preferences are important elements of an individual's personalty.

Example: The Anglo manager may expect eye-contact from his employees, and consider that if one does not look him straight-in-the-eye while he speaks, he is either hiding something or showing lack of respect. In some Latino cultures, however, the opposite is true. The employee may look away -- meaning no disrespect -- just a learned response within his frame of reference.

Example: A Native American woman is binding together wires in an electronics plant. The boss sees that she has come up with a better way to do the work, and, over her protests, makes a big fuss. "Hey, everybody, this is the kind of work I want to see!" he shouts to the other workers on the floor.

The boss, of course, thinks he was doing the woman a favor. The dominant American culture sees public praise as the best reward for a job well done. But in some cultures, where the emphasis is on group harmony and cohesion, singling someone out appears to threaten the group and causes the individual to suffer a loss of face.

Hopefully in a workshop or through personal relationships with people of other cultures, the boss in the last scenario would become aware that a better response on his part would have been to offer the employee a letter of praise for her personnel file.

With education and personal concern, an appreciation of cultural diversity will make the American mosaic of a workplace happier for all people.

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