

Ten Critical Success Factors for a Multicultural Initiative

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Background: In January 1998 a version of this discussion paper was submitted to Duke University's Vice President for Institutional Equity to assist the Employee Equity Working Group in clarifying a working focus for their group. The working group was operating under a mandate to recommend and help implement an effective multicultural initiative that would achieve institutional equity for employees.

As we reviewed the previous 18 months work of this group it became apparent that, like most cross-functional groups which are designed to represent a broad reach of organizational leadership, Duke's version of a diversity committee had struggled trying to reach consensus on both concepts and action initiatives. It was the intent of this paper to articulate essential conditions to achieve both effective functioning in Duke's diversity committee and meaningful results organization-wide.

These critical success factors are derived from over 20 years experience with our clients. They represent our observations from both what has worked and what has not worked as a wide variety of organizations have worked to launch and sustain effective multicultural initiatives.

Assumptions and Critical Success Factors (CSF)

We recommend that the Senior Leadership and the Diversity Committee discuss and align with the following assumptions, which in our experience function as critical success factors for the type of initiative you have undertaken. We are aware that the implementation of these recommendations is in some respects an iterative process. That is, some decisions, such as resources and funding, must be made initially and also will be revisited when leaders have had the benefit of advanced training and more effective dialogue on the strategic design of the initiative.

CSF #1. Commit Senior Leadership to a Multiyear Initiative. The issues under scrutiny are extremely complex, multivariate subjects, maintained by deeply emotional and largely unconscious forces, as well as long-standing institutional and cultural practices. Our society has struggled with effective approaches to equity issues during the entire course of US history. It is therefore within the context of an anticipated lifelong journey that we will be launching and sustaining this initiative.

CSF #2. Include All the Historical –isms. There is no hierarchy of oppressions. Members of our community each will determine, on the basis of their experience in a variety of cultural groups, which of the –isms are their initial interest and concern. Ultimately, for the initiative to fulfill its purpose, we envision all members of our community being knowledgeable and skilled at identifying and confronting all of the forms of modern –isms as they continue to play out in our society and organization.

CSF #3. Commit to Adopting a Unified Conceptual Approach. The most successful initiatives are based on one comprehensive model that incorporates issues and actions throughout the organization. In order to be systemically effective, it will be

important to consciously adopt and maintain a common language for planning, training and evaluation purposes. Multiple theories and languages leave members of the community without the ability to teach and support each other in such a complex endeavor. A unified conceptual approach is teachable and learnable over time and allows skill building to grow exponentially.

CSF #4. Plan and Account for Strategic Action at Each of the Four Levels: Personal, Interpersonal, Institutional, and Cultural. The -isms were created and have been maintained historically through the interaction of these logical levels of activity. A successful initiative in a system as complex as ours can be accomplished only with conscious planning and meaningful results at each of these levels. Therefore, as early as possible, we encourage everyone to become familiar with these distinctions.

CSF #5. Create an Internal Diversity Committee and Publish the Process by which it is Chosen and How it will Operate. The Diversity Committee will be the cross-functional working group that studies issues, recommends and often leads action on a broad front throughout the organization. Since it is almost never possible to constitute a diversity committee with representatives from each and every important constituency, it will be a well-conceived process, fully disclosed, that will provide leadership groups with good will and authority. The process by which the Diversity Committee is constituted is always an important symbolic message to the community.

CSF #6. Define and Allocate Adequate Resources to the Initiative. If this is done from the outset, those who are devoting their time and energy to the success of the initiative are empowered. Planning will ensue that identifies both funded and unfunded action items. In addition, contributors are encouraged by the knowledge that the time they are spending will be protected and existing work will be backfilled, if necessary, with staff support. Defining resources of time, staffing, and funding will free the Diversity Committee up to engage in the critical work of the initiative that only they can accomplish.

CSF #7. Commit the Diversity Committee to Becoming a Learning Laboratory, in which the cultural differences within the group can be utilized for learning purposes, as the group executes its action strategies. It takes several years to learn and integrate the known set of effective multicultural leadership skills, and it is essential that the Diversity Committee demonstrate capacity for both teaching and learning such skills. The Committee will be the ongoing, internal source of guidance to the organization during the life of the initiative. Moreover, it is only through the experience of receiving great personal value from the learning environment that members of the Diversity Committee could be expected to maintain their heartfelt commitment to such an endeavor over such a long period.

CSF #8. Identify both Personal Objectives and Institutional Outcomes for the Diversity Committee. Diversity working groups do not naturally agree about the priorities for action in such a large organization. Moreover, they hardly ever agree on the process for undertaking action on a given priority. It is the very nature of multicultural work that one group's ideas about goals and process are different from those of other groups. Therefore, it is essential that opportunity be provided for each member of the Diversity Committee to be supported in following his/her particular passion, while the group as a whole commits to a set of institutional outcomes.

CSF #9. Commit to Adequate Training for the Diversity Committee and Senior Leadership. Our previous language and skill sets, even though well-intended, are not enough to get us where we want to go. The finest cast of actors and musicians, with all their individual skill and experience, know that they will rehearse extensively together in order to produce a successful show. Merely to appear on the same stage, at the same time, under the same marquee, would not guarantee a memorable performance. (See Components of an Initial Two-Day Training Retreat below.)

CSF #10. Commit Senior Leadership to Modeling Culturally Competent Behavior. This is the single greatest predictor of the success of a multicultural initiative. While it is especially symbolic and empowering for Senior Leadership to be seen as invested in learning and leading by example, this success factor also includes all other constituent groups who have leadership influence in the community, and certainly all those with teaching positions or supervisory authority over others. Modeling recognizable competent behavior is made possible by training in a consistent, unified model that offers a distinct description of effective behaviors.

Components of an Initial Two-Day Multicultural Training

In order to establish an effective learning environment and establish common multicultural language and skills, other leadership teams have undertaken training as described below. These components characterize the type of training provided by a VISIONS consulting team in our work with client organizations.

1. An adult learning model incorporating cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects:
 - a. Cognitive: prereading packets, theory workbooks, lectures
 - b. Affective: opportunity in facilitated small groups to examine values, feelings
 - c. Behavioral: action planning on work opportunities chosen by participants
2. Introduction of a common conceptual framework and language with which to understand the complexities of work with the modern -isms, including issues of race/color, gender, class, age, religion, sexual orientation, ability, and more.
3. An opportunity for participants to explore their own cultural identity, assumptions, strengths and areas for growth as culturally competent leaders.
4. Guidelines for creating an atmosphere of respect, trust, and effective dialogue.
5. Applications work sessions to meet specific objectives of the Diversity Committee and Senior Leadership.

Expected Training Results

Using the first two-day training session for the Diversity Committee as an example:

- A. Gained the ability to articulate a clear and compelling case for systemic, integrated multicultural perspective and training.
- B. Agreed to a set of operating guidelines for the Committee's efforts.
- C. Achieved focus and agreement on the unified action item(s) deliverable by the Diversity Committee to the organization over the next 12 months.
- D. Identified department or individual projects in support of the Diversity Committee's goals
- E. Began to develop the capacity of the Diversity Committee to serve as champions and internal consultants to the organization across a wide range of functional areas.
- F. Identified specific ways in which the training retreat has benefited individual participants both personally and professionally.