

Master's (MA) Major Research Paper

**Diversity training in the workplace:
Assessing effectiveness and outcomes**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	1
Purpose	1
Methodology.....	1
Findings.....	1
Implications	1
Limitations	1
INTRODUCTION	2
KEY CONCEPTS	3
Diversity training defined	3
How success is measured.....	3
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
Negative Attitudes School: failure and unintended consequences	6
Cultural Competency School: competency and evidence of positive results	8
Alternative Approaches School: diversity training adaptations	9
STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES.....	12
The Negative Attitudes view	12
The Cultural Competency view	14
The Alternative Approaches view.....	14
ANALYZING THE EVIDENCE	15
Organizational culture.....	17
Leadership	19
Types of training	20
Other factors that affect learning	21
SUMMARY.....	22
RECOMMENDATIONS	23
CONCLUSION.....	26
REFERENCES	28
APPENDIX A: BENNETT'S INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY MODEL	34

ABSTRACT

Purpose:

This paper reviews the existing literature regarding the effectiveness of diversity training within organizations and examines the empirical evidence and theoretical foundations that support claims that such initiatives can help reduce racist attitudes and behaviours.

Methodology:

The author conducted a thorough examination of relevant research reported in academic and practitioner publications.

Findings:

On balance, the evidence supports the contention that diversity training can lead to positive outcomes, but results vary depending on (i) the culture of an organization; (ii) the quality of its leadership; and (iii) the type of diversity training that is offered.

Implications:

Findings support the assertion that training alone will not eliminate racist attitudes and behaviours in the workplace and must be supported by additional measures to affect positive change. The author concludes with recommendations in this regard.

Limitations:

The author of this paper did not conduct any independent empirical research. Findings are based on studies conducted by others that likely contain their own limitations and weaknesses, including small sample sizes, inadequate use of diversity training metrics, and an over-reliance on self-reported evaluations (Alhejji et al., 2016, p. 140).

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and Canada in response to repeated killings of unarmed black men at the hands of law enforcement, various organizations — from corporations to non-profits and from government entities to broader public service agencies and institutions — have stepped up their efforts to combat racism and discrimination in their respective workplaces. Places of work have relied on a variety of education and/or training programs to address racist attitudes and behaviours in the hope that their chosen initiatives would result in positive changes within their organizations. But what if these investments and well-intentioned efforts were not contributing to their intended outcomes? Put bluntly, is there evidence that such initiatives actually work? And if not, what can be done about this?

In this paper, which takes a critical look at diversity training in the workplace, I will argue that when appropriately supported, adapted, and implemented, diversity training can contribute to reducing racist attitudes and behaviours within organizations but that its effectiveness will be moderated by three factors: (i) the culture of an organization; (ii) the quality of its leadership; and (iii) the type of diversity training that is offered. In other words, diversity training alone will not lead to desired change.

To support these contentions, I propose to (1) review the existing literature and schools of thought regarding the efficacy of diversity training, (2) examine the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments made by the proponents of each school, and (3) thoroughly assess the evidence and theoretical foundations that support the desired outcomes of eliminating racist attitudes and behaviours in the workplace. The

implications of these findings will then be discussed, followed by recommendations to adequately support, adapt, and implement effective workplace diversity training.

KEY CONCEPTS

Diversity training defined

Diversity training can be defined as “a distinct set of programs aimed at facilitating positive inter-group interactions, reducing prejudice and discrimination and enhancing the skills, knowledge and motivation of people to interact with diverse others”

(Bezrukova et al., 2012. In Alhejji et al., 2016, pp. 95-96). This general term can encompass various types of instruction, including anti-discrimination training; cultural awareness education; cultural competency, cultural-diversity, and cultural safety training; inclusivity initiatives; interpersonal sensitivity education, and unconscious-bias training (Colvin-Burque et al., 2007; Carrizales, 2010; Sheppard, 2019; Bendick et al., 2001; Sussman, 1997). According to Hanover & Cellar (1998), the main objectives of diversity training are: to increase awareness about diversity issues; to reduce biases and stereotypes; and to modify [harmful] behaviours, although the authors note that not every training initiative is designed to address all three goals at once (p. 106).

How success is measured

While the criteria that is used to measure the success of diversity training may vary from one organization to another — depending on the specific objectives of a particular type

of training¹ — metrics and measurement methods typically include three components: (1) a trainee evaluation of the teaching program or workshop, (2) a self-assessment of learning,² and (3) an improvement of organizational outcomes. While the first two assessment components are rather straightforward, choosing the appropriate measures for the third component (organizational outcomes) is not. Indeed, according to Von Bergen et al. (2002 p. 240), decision-makers typically expect a wide array of positive outcomes from workplace diversity training that can include (i) enhanced personal effectiveness and interpersonal communications among staff; (ii) greater sensitivity to social and demographic changes; (iii) a decrease of litigation alleging discrimination; (iv) enhanced perceptions of fairness and equity; and (v) increased overall organizational performance and productivity. Given the wide range of possible success criteria³ and the apparent lack of agreement on the appropriate metrics to use in measuring “improvements of organizational outcomes,” this paper will focus primarily on effectiveness as it relates to employee awareness and behavioural changes regarding diversity issues.

¹ Effectiveness measures usually relate to specific training objectives. For instance, a workshop assessed by Hanover & Cellar (1998, p. 110) had the following four objectives: (i) highlighting the role of diversity within an organization’s strategic plan; (ii) understanding cultural biases and stereotypes as part of cultural conditioning; (iii) raising awareness about harmful personal behaviours; and (iv) allowing participants to practice skills to manage a diverse workforce. A questionnaire was used to measure participants’ reactions and self-evaluate learning outcomes (Hanover & Cellar, 1998, p. 111).

² Employee surveys, for example, can assess participants affective reactions to a program (White, 1998. In Wiethoff, 2004, p. 272).

³ Other possible metrics include measures related to the hiring, retention, and turnover of racialized persons, as well as feedback on various perceptions within an organization assessed through surveys, focus groups, face-to-face interviews, and direct observations (Velásquez, n.d.).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic and mainstream debates regarding the effectiveness of workplace diversity training can be divided into three broad schools of thought. The Negative Attitudes School, the Cultural Competency School, and the Alternative Approaches School. The Negative Attitudes School, which includes the work of Dover et al. (2020), Sheppard (2019), Noon (2018), and Dobbin & Kalev (2016), asserts that diversity training frequently has negative impacts that can undermine the goals of ending racial discrimination and racism in organizations. In contrast, the Cultural Competency School, which is exemplified by the research of Bezrukova et al. (2016), Alhejji et al. (2016), Carrizales (2010), Von Bergen et al. (2002) and others, contends that diversity training can have positive learning and behavioural outcomes. The third school is the Alternative Approaches School whose proponents believe that diversity training can be effective but only under certain conditions. This school offers alternatives to fulfill the objectives that trainers and organizations hope to achieve. For instance, adherents of this school suggest that successful training is dependent on the careful selection of instructors and the methods used by these trainers (Lindsay, 1994, p. 19; Delikat, 1995. In Von Bergen et al., 2002, p. 247). This school also recognizes that diversity training alone cannot solve racial inequity in the workplace (Livingston, 2020) and includes the ideas of Mensah & Williams (2017) who believe that the key to dismantling systemic racism lies in convincing white majority decision-makers that it is in their best interests to enact change — i.e., a new twist on the ideas of Roosevelt Thomas (1991) linking diversity to business goals in reaction to changing demographics (Sussman 1997, p. 4).

The views defended by each school are presented in greater detail in the next sections, followed by an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each school's key arguments.

Negative Attitudes School: failure and unintended consequences

The ubiquity of diversity training in workplace settings over the past few decades has generated a recent body of literature that questions its efficacy. Grouped together under the Negative Attitudes School, proponents of this school cite the failure and unintended consequences of diversity training initiatives and the resulting backlash (Kidder et al. 2004, p. 78).

In 2020, Tessa L. Dover, Cheryl R. Kaiser, and Brenda Major added their voices to the growing critique. Writing from a social psychology perspective, these academics asserted that diversity training can unintentionally send signals that can undermine an organization's efforts to combat racism and racial bias. For example, when signaling that underrepresented groups are treated fairly, an organization may also be inadvertently indicating that non racialized groups will be treated *unfairly* or will be excluded from certain employment opportunities (Dover et al. 2020, p. 160). According to these researchers, an organization may also be accidentally stating that racialized employees are somehow less competent than other employees and need additional help to perform their jobs, which could reinforce bigoted stereotypes as well as undermine the self-confidence of racialized persons within an organization (p. 168).

Criticism from this school also extends to the brevity of diversity training programs that Shepherd (2019) claims do not allow sufficient time for participants to internalize and apply new information (p. 3); may promote stereotypes instead of

attenuating discrimination (p. 4); can lead participants to needlessly see everything through a cultural lens (p. 4); and can unintentionally create divisions among work colleagues (p. 4). Shepherd concludes his critique by suggesting that greater attention should be paid to the failures of cultural awareness training and the lack of evidence to support the claims that such training leads to positive behavioural changes.

British academic Mike Noon is equally critical of unconscious bias training that has led high profile organizations such as Deloitte, KPMG, HSBC, BBC, the National Health Service, and the U.K. government to adopt name-blind job application evaluations (Noon, 2018, p. 198). According to Noon (2018), unconscious bias training can lead some participants to believe that unconscious biases are beyond their control (p. 202). Noon also notes that such training can provide a convenient excuse for organizations to ignore systemic racism and rely instead on “misguided efforts” to change individual employee behaviours (pp. 204-205).

Finally, Dobbin & Kalev (2016) claim that across hundreds of organizations over the past three decades, diversity training programs have failed to promote more women and racialized persons to top management positions and — when hiring managers felt that they were being coerced — increased biases towards racialized persons resulted in less diverse hiring (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016, pp. 4-5). Moreover, where positive post-training effects were found, the authors claim that these effects were short-lived (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016, p. 4).

Cultural Competency School: competency and evidence of positive results

Supporters of the Cultural Competency⁴ School rely on empirical evidence to assert that workplace diversity training can effectively address racism in organizations. These advocates include Bezrukova et al. (2016) who conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis of over 260 diversity training evaluations performed between 1972 and 2013 and found that diversity training had positive effects on (i) participant reactions; (ii) short-term and long-term cognitive learning; (iii) building of appropriate cultural competency skills; and (iv) increased awareness of diversity issues (pp. 1243-1245). These authors also observed that training in organizations or in educational settings can be equally effective; that stand-alone training without additional supporting initiatives leads to lesser outcomes; and that mandatory training provides better behavioural results than optional training (pp. 1243-1244).

Alhejji et al. (2016) found similar supportive data in their examination of 61 evaluations of diversity training outcomes published between 1994 and 2014. Their methodical review highlighted significant learning outcomes, e.g., increased knowledge and skills; and moderate positive business impacts, e.g., enhanced productivity, employee performance, and customer satisfaction (p. 130).

The merits of diversity training aimed at enhancing cultural competency were also examined by Tony Carrizales in 2010. In an article published in the *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, Professor Carrizales cites evidence that cultural competency

⁴ Fernandopulle (2007) defines cultural competency as the ability of an individual or organization “to work effectively in cross-cultural or multicultural interactions” (as cited in Carrizales, 2010, p. 594).

training enhances knowledge, attitudes, and worker skills in various occupations, (e.g., health care and social work), and suggests that teaching cultural competency to future public administrators would increase their effectiveness in serving increasingly diverse clienteles (Carrizales, 2010, pp. 593-595).

Other academics also believe that workplace diversity training can address prejudice and discrimination effectively. This includes Von Bergen et al. (2002) who assert that appropriate training, when implemented with other diversity initiatives, can have positive impacts (p. 248). Success factors mentioned by these scholars include customized training offered by a reputable trainer; senior executive buy-in with an ongoing commitment to training rather than a one-workshop quick fix;⁵ inclusive teaching methods rather than focussing on white privilege, assigning blame, or provoking feelings of guilt among participants; and training that avoids advocacy for a specific minority group (pp. 241, 243, 248). Interestingly, many of these success factors have also been identified by proponents of the Alternative Approaches School.

Alternative Approaches School: diversity training adaptations

Writing from a change management perspective, Lindsay (1994) proposed an alternative approach to diversity training that considers participant awareness levels of their own ethnic identities as the basis for training delivery (p. 22). Lindsay, who is both an academic and a diversity trainer, believes that diversity instructors have a responsibility to help majority white trainees move through successive stages of

⁵ According to Abrams (2021, p. 28), to be effective, training needs to be ongoing and evolving.

awareness of their own white ethnic identities⁶ and to replace blame and guilt that is often felt by participants with an understanding that all cultures throughout history have built systems that provide more resources for members of their respective majorities (p. 30). Over fifteen years later, diversity trainer Kofi Hope embraces a similar view.

Hope (2020) suggests that to help white majority trainees move beyond their feelings of anger, shame, and guilt, diversity training instructors should contest the idea that racism is an either/or proposition. Hope (2020) also asserts that conversations about systemic racism must ultimately lead to long-term dedicated efforts aimed at the dismantling of such systems and the rebuilding of partnerships with racialized communities. These views also resonate with renowned Harvard social psychologist Robert Livingston.

In addition to rejecting training that seeks to blame individuals for bad behaviour, Livingston (2020) sees a key role for leaders in organizations in creating an anti-racist organizational culture and ensuring buy-in from its employees (p. 70). According to Livingston (2020), an essential pre-condition to effectively addressing workplace racism [and/or systemic racism] requires leaders to build a broad consensus among all members of their respective organizations that there is a problem that needs to be addressed, adding that without “problem awareness” some white majority employees —

⁶ De Mello-e-Souza Wildermuth & Wildermuth (2011) also see diversity training as a process of moving participants through successive stages of a learning journey. Building on Milton Bennet’s Intercultural Sensitivity Model, these authors claim that training can be seen as a deliberate attempt to alter participants’ “natural” protective behaviours, and help move them “through various development stages, ranging from ‘denial’ of differences to ‘full integration’” (Bennett, 1986, p. 182. In De Mello-e-Souza Wildermuth & Wildermuth, 2011, p. 286; Bennett’s model is reproduced in Appendix A).

and resistant mid-level managers, in particular — will resent diversity initiatives and view themselves as victims of reverse discrimination (p. 67).

Building on previous work by Wildermuth & Gray (2005), which underscored the importance of adapting diversity training to the level of “intercultural development” of various groups of trainees (e.g., Lindsay, 1994, p. 22), De Mello-e-Souza Wildermuth & Wildermuth (2011) argue for an alternative diversity training paradigm. According to these academics, successful diversity training requires trainers and participants to intentionally concentrate on strengthening connections between diverse individuals and non-marginalized groups rather than focussing on perceived differences (pp. 284, 287). These authors argue that “differences based” training will lead participants to perceive racialized persons as “them” and give rise to “irresistible stereotypes” or deeply ingrained biases (Cullen, 2007, as cited in De Mello-e-Souza Wildermuth & Wildermuth, 2011, p. 287). Instead, they suggest alternative groupings during training (e.g., by shirt colour, according to personality types, or using team names) to help obscure racialized categories and create new, unexpected ties between trainees (p. 288).

Lastly, Mensah & Williams (2017) suggest that efforts to curb systemic racism would be more effective by highlighting that it is in the best interests of white majority persons to enact change. To support their thesis, the authors cite the increased social and economic costs associated with systemic racism, including “white flight” to “safer” neighborhoods and the resulting longer commute times for all (pp. 70-71); the underutilization of qualified racialized persons in society that increases the burden on employers and persons who are working (p. 120); and billions of dollars of lost productivity and avoidable healthcare costs stemming from unequal access to quality

health care services (p. 138). Although these academics do not specifically discuss alternative approaches to diversity training, their contribution to the anti-racism literature is nonetheless noteworthy.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The Negative Attitudes view

Although the Negative Attitudes School's assertion that diversity training is ineffective may displease academics and policymakers who believe in social justice, this school of thought's contrarian claims should not be rejected outright. A key strength of this school's arguments is that they are rooted in credible social and behavioural theories. For instance, Dobbin & Kalev's (2016) claim that coercion applied on decision-makers to hire more diverse employees in their organizations leads to resistance (p. 10) is supported by various resistance to change theories.⁷ Similarly, Noon's (2018) contention that unconscious bias training is mostly⁸ ineffective in convincing trainees to abandon hurtful racist beliefs and attitudes is rooted in Noon's advocacy for sociological and critical organizational theories, including Brook's (2013) reading of Dutch psychologist Hubert Herman's dialogical self theory⁹ (p. 205). Another strength of the Negative Attitudes School is its justified critique of the "quick-fix" nature of many training

⁷ These include social representation theory (Andersen & Andersen, 2014) and the theory of planned behaviour (Wiethoff, 2004).

⁸ Noon (2018) claims that unconscious bias training would likely have no impact on most forms of racism (e.g., symbolic, modern, and colour-blind racism) but concedes that such training could lead to self-reflection for aversive racism found in persons who generally embrace egalitarian views, adding that even with self-reflection this would not guarantee positive behavioural change (pp. 201-202).

⁹ Brook (2013) describes relations among workers as "routine dialogical contests between individual-collective workers and management over the meaning and purpose of employees' ideas, feelings, and behaviour" (p. 332).

initiatives — a point made by Noon (2018, p. 206) and Shepherd (2019, p 3). According to Shepherd (2019), even 30-hour workshops delivered over several days do not give trainees sufficient time to learn and internalize new information that can be meaningfully acted upon (p. 3). However, Shepherd (2019) also notes that only a few studies conclude that diversity training will have mostly negative effects (“fewer than two dozen articles”) compared to the vast literature which supports such training (p. 2). This statement alone should raise suspicion about this school’s claims.

Indeed, one of the glaring weaknesses of the Negative Attitudes School is the inability of this school’s views to find favour among a wider number of academics. Another weakness lies in the fact that proponents of this school are arguing against well-established theories from the psychological and organizational development literature that cannot be easily dismissed, e.g., inter-group contact theory,¹⁰ social interdependence theory.¹¹ A third weakness is that proponents of the Negative Attitudes view do not pay sufficient attention to the structural and contextual reasons for the failure of specific diversity training programs and gloss over the fact that there is a lot of variance in training programs from one organization to another.

¹⁰ Based on the work of social psychologist Gordon Allport (1954), inter-group contact theory contends that direct inter-group contact between diverse individuals has prejudice-reducing effects (Hewstone & Swart, 2011, p. 375)

¹¹ Morton Deutsch’s (1949) social interdependence theory holds that an individual’s assessment of how their outcomes are related to their own success will moderate the way in which they will interact with other members of a group (Wang, et al., 2020).

The Cultural Competency view

Adherents of the Cultural Competency School present strong arguments to support the idea that diversity training can lead to positive results. Among them is empirical evidence to support this claim that includes two previously mentioned meta-analysis evaluations (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Alhejji et al., 2016), which found that diversity training can have positive learning and behavioural outcomes. Another strength is found in the data, which supports the idea that the required knowledge and skills to work effectively in multicultural settings are competencies that can be taught (Carrizales, 2010). In addition to his own academic research, Carrizales (2010) cites a study by Beach et al. (2005) which showed that diversity training of health care professionals improved attitudes and skills (p. 595). Diversity as a teachable competence is also endorsed by Colvin-Burque et al. (2007).

The overall weakness of the Cultural Competency view is that most proponents of this school — with the notable exception of Von Bergen et al. (2002) — have acknowledged that diversity training, when poorly designed and improperly delivered, can do more harm than good. Stated simply, the views and evidence of the Negative Attitudes School cannot be ignored.

The Alternative Approaches view

The Alternative Approaches School supports the goals of diversity training while heeding the lessons of diversity training failures. Arguably, this “lessons-learned” approach is a key strength of this school of thought. Another strength of this school is that its members are not limited to academia but also include diversity practitioners, some of whom are also academics (e.g., Livingston, 2020; Hope, 2020). An additional

strength of the Alternative Approaches view resides in the thoughtful alternatives and adaptations to conventional diversity training that are proposed by proponents of this school, many of which are rooted in theories that seek to explain the psychological and social foundations of prejudice. This includes De Mello-e-Souza Wildermuth & Wildermuth's (2011) advocacy for training focussing on "commonalities" rather than differences (p. 284), Wildermuth & Gray's (2005) contention that diversity training must be adapted to the various "intercultural development" stages of participants (Ch. 4.2, para. 2), and Hope's (2020) suggestion that diversity training needs to move away from the typical binary view of racism, which is quick to label racist thoughts and actions, to instead address the larger question of how white-majority persons are contributing to systemic racism by ignoring oppressive systems in their respective workplaces.

ANALYZING THE EVIDENCE

Overall, evidence from the Cultural Competency and Alternative Approaches schools supports the claim that diversity training can lead to positive learning and behavioural outcomes. Adherents of the Alternative Approaches view however, provide additional data which show that resistance to diversity initiatives among members of the white majority is very real. Indeed, Livingston (2020) reveals that many white people, particularly in the U.S., believe that anti-Black racism has *decreased* over the last five decades and has been replaced by anti-white racism (p. 67). Reverse racism beliefs are also noted by other academics and practitioners of the Alternate Approaches School. For instance, Wildermuth & Grey (2005) suggest that "engendering a feeling of exclusion among employees who belong to the majority group" are among the possible harms of well-intentioned diversity initiatives because participants may be made to feel

“that initiatives focussed on minority groups will not benefit them” (ch. 2.2). Mensah & Williams (2017) raise similar concerns. In my view, acknowledging the potential negatives of some forms of diversity training and presenting them as “cautionary tales” is the right approach when it comes planning for and implementing such training in organizations. The evidence also suggests that the context in which diversity training is dispensed in organizations will have a bearing on hoped-for outcomes (Kochan et al., 2003. In Alhejji et al. 2016, p. 98).

As mentioned previously, the fact that adherents of the Alternative Approaches view acknowledge that diversity training can have unintended negative consequences leads its adherents to propose thoughtful strategies to avoid potential pitfalls. Moreover, the reality that proponents of the Alternative Approaches School similarly accept the evidence of the Cultural Competency School — which includes empirical evidence from the large meta-analytical studies conducted by Bezrukova et al. (2016) and Alhejji et al. (2016) — also provides me with the necessary confidence to support this school’s views.

In reviewing the literature, I have identified three contextual factors that have a determining role in diversity training outcomes: (1) the culture of an organization; (2) the quality of its leadership; and (3) the type of training that is offered. I will examine these three factors in the next sections of this paper as well as evidence to support my contention that they each have a moderating effect on the success of workplace diversity training. This will be followed by a short discussion of other factors that have been shown to affect training outcomes over which organizations and diversity trainers have no control.

Organizational culture

The first contextual factor that can influence the success or failure of diversity training is organizational culture. For the purposes of this discussion, I will adopt the scholarly definition of culture proposed by renowned American social psychologist Edgar Schein and organizational development consultant Peter Schein in the fifth edition of their foundational book entitled *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

According to Schein & Schein (2016, part 1.0), cultures within groups and organizations can be defined generally as “learned patterns of beliefs, values, assumptions, and behavioural norms that manifest themselves at different levels of observability.” These levels are described by the authors as (i) behavioural regularities when people interact (e.g., use of language); (ii) climate — or the feeling conveyed in a group by the way its members interact, both internally and externally; (iii) formal rituals and celebrations; (iv) espoused values; (v) formal philosophy; (vi) group norms; (vii) rules of the game — i.e., progressions that allow newcomers to “learn the ropes”; (viii) identity and group self-image; (ix) embedded skills that are passed on from generation to generation; (x) habits of thinking, mental models, or linguistic paradigms; (xi) shared meanings; and (xii) “root metaphors” or integrating symbols (Schein & Schein, 2016, part 1, s. 1). While the authors use the preceding categories to define the content of a given culture, they also propose a dynamic definition to help researchers make sense of culture within organizations from a holistic perspective (Schein & Schein, 2016, part 1, s. 1):

The culture of a group can be defined as the accumulated shared learning of that group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration; which has worked well enough

to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation to those problems.

This accumulated learning is a pattern or system of beliefs, values, and behavioral norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness.

Culture varies from one organization to another, and this is also the case when members of an organization react to — or adapt to — diversity in the workplace. Thus, considering these differences in each organization is important. Indeed, according to the adherents of the Alternative Approaches view, the starting point to plan an effective workplace diversity intervention requires a determination of the level of collective awareness about diversity issues for a given group (Wildermuth & Gray, 2005, ch. 4.2; Bendick et al., 2001, p. 17; Lindsay, 1994, p. 22). Instructors who possess this information can use this knowledge to tailor their teaching content and methods and, in some cases, suggest to an organization that other measures need to be in place before diversity training can begin (e.g., designing and implementing well thought out anti-racism and inclusion policies known to all members of an organization). Indeed, according to Lai & Kleiner (2001), organizations that already acknowledge and celebrate diversity and have adopted and implemented formal policies for building and supporting a diverse workforce will have laid the groundwork for successful diversity training (p. 14).

Livingston (2020) takes these ideas one step further, insisting that organizations must be deliberate in their efforts to address deeply embedded cultural and institutional practices that result in workplace discrimination (p. 69). This is where leadership plays an essential role (Schein & Schein, 2016, part 1, s. 1).

Leadership

Leadership is the second contextual factor that can contribute to the success or failure of diversity training (Dobbs & Brown, 1997. In Wiethoff 2004, p. 264). In highlighting its importance, Schein & Schein (2016) position leadership in the context of “stage[s] of growth of [an] organization or group” as it learns how to deal with various issues and forms its distinctive organizational culture (Schein & Schein, 2016, part 3; s. 8). It is during this process that leaders can exert their influence “by imposing their own beliefs, values, assumptions, and behavioural rules on their subordinates” (Schein & Schein, 2016, s. 8). Leaders can also play a similar role when an organisation is faced with dysfunction (Schein & Schein (2016), part 3):

Organizations [...] may find themselves with beliefs, values, norms, and basic assumptions that are to some degree dysfunctional and will require change that will typically involve some “culture change.” It now falls to leadership [...] to identify the problem, to assess how existing culture will aid or hinder the required changes, and to launch what can [...] be appropriately called a “culture change program.”¹²

When viewed as a “culture change program” to address the dysfunction of racist attitudes and behaviours within an organization, diversity training would arguably benefit from strong leadership.

The importance of organizational culture change led by influential and effective leaders is also conveyed by Von Bergen et al. (2002). According to these authors,

¹² A leader’s beliefs or ideas can also be rejected by members of an organization based on contextual factors. For instance, Schein & Schein (2016) note that “every culture is nested in some larger culture and can do only what the larger culture affords, tolerates, or supports” (s. 10).

senior executive buy-in is essential to the success of diversity training (Von Bergen et al., 2002, p. 70). This view is likewise endorsed by a majority of U.S. diversity trainers surveyed by Bendick et al. (2001), who also consider the support of mid-level managers as critical (p. 17). Indeed, according to Bendick et al. (2001, p. 17), “[w]hen trainees understand that the managers to whom they report are serious about this subject, they are more likely to participate in training wholeheartedly, apply its lessons, and generalize to situations [that] training did not specifically address [...]” (p. 17).¹³ Moreover, the legitimacy of diversity training is further enhanced when leaders begin to model the anti-racist attitudes, values, and behaviours that they expect their employees to emulate. Being symbolically named “anti-racism champion” and hiring a few more racialized employees is simply not enough.

Types of training

The third contextual factor that can have a determining impact on diversity training outcomes is the type of training that is offered. One of the problems encountered by researchers studying the effects of diversity training, however, is that there is no blueprint for best-of-class teaching methods. In a survey of diversity trainers in the U.S., Bendick et al. (2001) found that instructors use an eclectic variety of instructional methods, with a preference for active learning activities (p. 14). Popular activities included role playing, discussions of real incidents that have occurred within

¹³ The opposite has also been demonstrated. When managers view diversity training as a distraction and set a negative tone for diversity initiatives — e.g., by intimating that training has been mandated because of the actions of a few ‘bad apples’ within an organization or strictly to meet legal requirements — training has reportedly been largely unsuccessful (Flynn, 1999; Rosner, 1999; and Zane, 1998. In Wiethoff, 2004, pp. 270-271).

organizations, and teaching that focusses on behaviours that support inclusiveness (Bendick et al., 2001, pp, 14, 19). While the current literature is inconclusive regarding which teaching methods lead to better outcomes, diversity trainers have provided us with a few clues.

One approach which is said to provide superior results according to Bendick et al. (2001), sees organizations working closely with diversity trainers to conduct a “pre-training diversity audit” to inform the content, style, and mode(s) of delivery of diversity instruction in a manner that is adapted to the culture of an organization (p. 17). Other members of the Alternative Approaches School have also supported this method by highlighting the importance of adjusting diversity training to the level of intercultural development of participants (Wildermuth & Gray, 2005, ch. 4.2; De Mello-e-Souza Wildermuth & Wildermuth, 2011, p. 286). However, Wildermuth & Gray (2005, ch. 4.2) also warn that training that is highly effective with a group that is further along in their educational journey could completely backfire with a group that is less sensitized to diversity issues. Bendick et al. (2001) also stress that working closely with organizations in the planning stages of diversity training following a pre-training diversity audit is an essential part of organizational learning (p. 17).

Other factors that affect learning

While the evidence suggest that the culture of an organization, the quality of its leadership, and the type of training offered will influence the results of diversity training, other factors can also have an impact on outcomes. These include differences among individual learners and the personal motivations of individuals to learn (Wiethoff, 2004,

p. 271). Factors such as personality traits, age, and self-efficacy¹⁴ account for some of these differences and have been shown to be strong predictors of learning motivation and of successful learning outcomes (Colquitt & Simmering, 1998; Mathieu et al., 1993. In Wiethoff, 2004, p. 271). The fact that organizations and diversity trainers can do little to change or influence the preceding factors is problematic, however, it also highlights the importance for organizations to focus on what they *can* control or influence to support positive outcomes.

SUMMARY

As established in the literature, diversity training can have positive cognitive and behavioural outcomes (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Alhejji et al., 2016; Colvin-Burque et al., 2007; Von Bergen et al., 2002). However, according to academics and practitioners of the Alternative Approaches School, training alone will likely be insufficient to support long-lasting positive changes within organizations (Lindsay, 1994, p. 21; Richard & Johnson, 1998, p. 79; Lai & Kleiner, 2001, p. 15; Abrams, 2021, p. 27). Indeed, following an in-depth survey of diversity trainers in the U.S., Bendick et al. (2001, p. 16) reported that nearly all respondents expressed the conviction that training “should be part of [a] broader change process.”¹⁵ This view is also endorsed by the adherents of the Alternative Approaches School who suggest that diversity training must be (i) part of

¹⁴ Self-efficacy is defined as a person’s belief that they have the required judgement to attain designated types of performances with the skills that they have (Mathieu et al., 1993, p. 126). Mathieu et al., (1993) and Harrison, Chadwick & Scales (1996) found that self-efficacy can influence a person’s motivation to learn and embrace new diversity-friendly behaviours (In Wiethoff, 2004, pp. 271-272).

¹⁵ According to Richard & Johnson (1998, p. 79), the implementation of various diversity initiatives within an organization will reinforce each other, “send a clear message,” and “conveys the earnestness of [...] dedication to such practices.”

a larger cultural change program to address deeply embedded racism; (ii) supported by strong leadership across all levels of an organization in order to legitimize efforts to eliminate racist attitudes and behaviours; and (iii) adapted to the intercultural development level of participants based a pre-training diversity audit. Given their importance, these suggestions are embedded within the recommendations presented in the following section.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The preceding discussion and analysis of the diversity training, organizational development, and psychology literatures have led me to present five recommendations that I believe can support effective diversity training in the workplace:

1. Establishing problem awareness and needed action

Problem awareness is a required first step to addressing racist attitudes and behaviours in organizations and is essential to combat institutional inertia (Allison 1999, p. 89).^{16, 17} According to Livingston (2020, p. 67), “if your employees don’t believe that racism exists in the company, then diversity initiatives will be perceived as the problem not the solution.” Based on his extensive work with Fortune 500 companies, Livingston (2020, p. 67) attests that managers who recognize racism in society often fail to see racism in

¹⁶ Participants in a study conducted by Allison (1999) noted that institutional inertia is often motivated by “if it is not broken, don’t fix it” attitudes within organizations (p. 90). Other factors cited were resistance to change, fear and discomfort, and a denial of the existence of systemic racism (Allison, 1999, pp. 90, 91).

¹⁷ Research also shows that people who believe that diversity issues do not exist within their organizations will view diversity training as unnecessary (Sussman 1997. In Wiethoff 2004, p. 269), resulting in lower motivation towards such training, which, in turn, negatively impacts learning outcomes (Colquitt, LePine, & Noe, 2000; Cole, Smith, & Harris, 2000. In Wiethoff, 2004, p. 271).

their own organizations.” This is worrisome, says Livingston (2020), because such beliefs can undermine support for diversity initiatives (p. 67).¹⁸

2. Demonstrating legitimacy

Supportive leadership at all levels of an organization is instrumental to demonstrating the legitimacy of diversity training. The effectiveness of diversity training is enhanced when leaders signal that embracing diversity is important for their organizations and begin to intentionally model expected anti-racists attitudes, values, and behaviours (Von Bergen et al, 2002, p. 70; Bendick et al. 2001; p. 17). Arguably, these actions can be further reinforced by positioning them as part of a larger “culture change program” (Schein & Schein, 2016, part 3).

3. Making diversity training mandatory

There is a strong argument to be made for mandatory diversity training within organizations.¹⁹ On balance, the evidence supports the idea that mandatory diversity training has larger positive effects than optional training (Bezrukova et al. 2016, p. 1238). Mandatory training also has the added benefit of highlighting its legitimacy. Indeed, when organizations implement mandatory

¹⁸ Some have suggested that organizations should publicize specific information about diversity programs, including the number of complaints related to equal employment opportunity, development and retention (Digh, 1998, Mueller, 1998, and White, 1998. In Wiethoff, 2004, p. 275).

¹⁹ I am not suggesting that governments should legislate to make diversity training mandatory. What I am suggesting is that when organizations choose to implement diversity training, this type of training should be mandatory for all staff, as opposed to optional.

diversity training, they are clearly stating their commitment to ending racism and systemic racism within their respective workplaces.^{20, 21}

4. Steering clear of blame and guilt

As highlighted by academic researchers and practitioners, diversity training that uses blame and guilt to convince members of the white majority to abandon racist attitudes and behaviours can lead to animosity and backlash among white-majority participants (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016, p. 4; Kidder et al., 2004, pp. 79-80, 91; Von Bergen et al., 2002, p. 243). Moreover, training that creates anxiety and/or negative feelings among participants has been shown to have negative effects on learning motivation (Colquitt, LePine, & Noe, 2000; Cole, Smith, & Harris, 2000. In Wiethoff, 2004, p. 271). Thus, diversity trainers who hope to engage with receptive audiences should steer clear of this counterproductive pedagogical approach. Avoiding animosity and backlash requires skilled diversity trainers who can manage conflict effectively when it arises (Lindsay 1994, pp. 21, 30). This also requires organizations to exercise due diligence in vetting the credentials of diversity trainers as well as their proposed training content and methods.²²

²⁰ Mandatory training also avoids the common issue reported by diversity trainers that optional training sessions amount to “preaching to the choir,” resulting in little to no change in pre-existing attitudes (De Mello e-Souza Wildermuth & Wildermuth, 2011, p. 286).

²¹ From a human resources perspective, Abrams 2021 suggests that mandatory training can serve as a precursor to hold employees accountable for their behaviours (p. 28).

²² According to Von Bergen et al. (2002), the fact that there are no set qualifications or standards for diversity trainers has led to a cottage industry of self-proclaimed experts with mixed results (pp. 240, 241). These authors also note that choosing the wrong diversity trainer “can do immeasurable damage [...]” (Delikat, 1995. In Von Bergen et al., 2002, p. 247).

5. Focussing on building alliances and connections

According to De Mello-e-Souza Wildermuth & Wildermuth (2011), diversity training that focusses on differences triggers a mechanism in our brains that will perceive certain individuals as “others” rather than persons who are “in-group” team members (p. 287). Instead, these researchers suggest that diversity trainers should (i) help participants perceive commonalities; (ii) blur the traditional lines of group categorizations; and (iii) help trainees build “supra category” groups that include all members of an organization (De Mello-e-Souza Wildermuth & Wildermuth, 2011, p. 287).^{23, 24}

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have presented an overview of how the existing literature assesses the effectiveness of workplace diversity training and have divided these views into three broad schools of thought: The Negative Attitudes School, which claims that diversity training can do more harm than good due to unintended consequences and participant backlash; the Cultural Competency School, which argues that diversity training can have positive learning and behavioural outcomes; and the Alternative Approaches School whose proponents suggest alternate training approaches supplemented by various measures and initiatives to address systemic racism.

²³ One suggestion is to group trainees by personality traits (e.g., intro or extraversion, perfectionism) and engage in discussions about differences “within a blanket of commonality” (De Mello-e-Souza Wildermuth & Wildermuth, 2011, p. 287).

²⁴ It should be noted, however, that De Mello-e-Souza Wildermuth & Wildermuth, 2011 steer clear of adopting a colour-blind attitude towards racism.

While the arguments presented by each of these schools contain nuggets of wisdom, a careful examination of the strengths and weaknesses of each school leads me to conclude that the contentions of the Alternative Approaches School are well-founded, primarily because: (1) supporters of this view stress the importance of understanding trainees' awareness levels of racism, systemic racism, and their own white ethnic identities before training begins; and (2) its proponents acknowledge the claims of the Negative Attitudes view as valid critiques of traditional diversity training and have proposed alternate approaches that are grounded in well-established learning and behavioural theories (e.g., inter-group contact theory, social interdependence theory). Hence, the five recommendations that I have presented in the preceding section are aligned with the views of the proponents of Alternative Approaches School. If implemented as part of a comprehensive set of initiatives to support diversity in the workplace, it is my contention that these recommendations will help organizations support positive diversity training outcomes.

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<http://ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/magazines/discourses-diversity-links-between-conversation/docview/213079382/se-2?accountid=15182>

APPENDIX A: BENNETT'S INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY MODEL

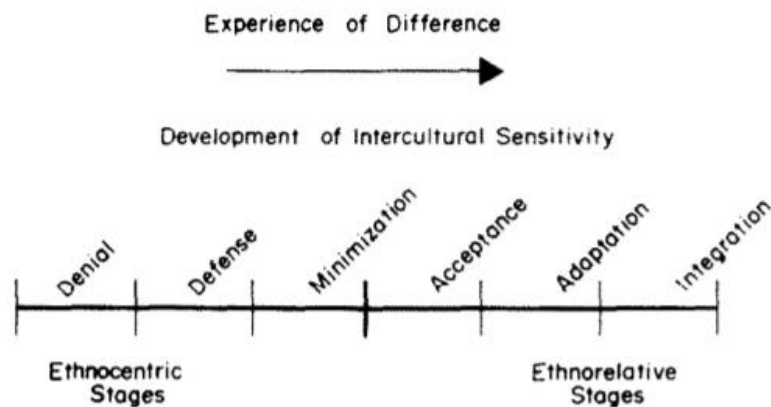


FIGURE 1.

The continuum illustrated in Figure 1 is divided into six "stages of development." Each stage represents a way of experiencing difference, for instance Denial (of difference), Defense (against difference), etc. It is assumed in the model that intercultural sensitivity increases with movement to the right towards more "relative" treatments of difference. The midpoint of the continuum represents a division between "ethnocentrism" as that

term is generally understood (e.g., Porter & Samovar, 1983) and "ethnorelativism," a term coined here as an appropriate antonym of ethnocentrism. The later stages of ethnorelativism include concepts such as Adler's (1977) "multicultural man," Bochner's (1979) "mediating person," Heath's (1977) "maturity," and "intercultural competence" as discussed by a number of authors (e.g., Dinges, 1983; Brislin, et al., 1983).

The choice and sequencing of stages in this model are based on the theoretical considerations discussed above and on fifteen years of teaching and training experience in intercultural communication with a wide range of students. Varieties of this model have been presented to many groups of intercultural educators and discussed in advanced intercultural communication seminars over a period of three years. In addition, the model has been used successfully to design curricula for various courses and workshops in intercultural communication. As much as possible, it represents the real-life observations of educators in this field and the actual reported experiences of students.

Source: Bennett, M. (1986). A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 10, pp. 181-182.