

Swanson, R. A. (1992). Valuing diversity without performance is a ticket to mediocrity. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*. 3 (4), 319-321.

## Valuing Diversity Without Performance Is a Ticket to Mediocrity

I love diversity and believe organizations and nations require diversity to be vital. I have always delighted in the smorgasbord of human aptitude. My head tilts in respect for those who can sing, run a straight welding bead, hold poetry in their heads, keep their desks clean, make sound business decisions in the middle of chaos, or know exactly when to put an arm around someone who is in need. I remember the delight I felt in learning that there are many independent dimensions of hearing and that this most likely means no two of us ever hear the same symphony. I believe that individuals are complex, diverse, and full of potential. Knowing that I think this way, please be generous in interpreting my words in this age of political correctness.

I love diversity, but I love performance even more. In spite of my own failings and limitations, I have never celebrated mediocrity or poor performance in myself or others. I predict that those in HRD who pursue diversity separately from high performance are in for a rude awakening. Personally, I do not want to get involved in another exchange among educated people pandering to the rhetoric of "valuing diversity" without reference to excellence in performance—or, even worse, trying to justify sustained poor performance through the rhetoric of diversity. If "valuing diversity" is to have substance, it must be the means to improved organizational and individual performance rather than a goal in itself.

Thus the problem. The valuing diversity movement has an egocentricity and disconnection that cannot be tolerated by productive organizations. An unstated assumption is that blind acceptance of diversity will automatically result in something better. However, blind acceptance twists the high performance values of our immigrant nation. Our diverse forebears simply wanted the opportunity to succeed and to be judged on their performance. Nobody got a gold star just for showing up. They got gold stars for the added value of their performance. To clear up our thinking, we could all use a brief trip back to the 1700s for a walk down Market Street in Philadelphia.

Meanwhile, when leaders of less-developed nations, such as Singapore, lecture us about our confusion of rights with responsibilities and of potential with performance, we should listen to them rather than brush them off

(Richardson, 1992). After all, countries eager to improve their lot are most likely to be the benefactors of our societal nonperformance agendas.

The internal contradiction of what businesses are up against is best shown in the continuous quality improvement movement. The core struggle in this worldwide movement is to ensure organizational existence (economics) through high-quality–low-cost products or services (economics) by reducing variation (economics). Now, let's try doing these things through "valuing diversity." Whoa, wait a minute. To be world class requires less variability in the production of high quality goods and services. For most managers, the challenge is to reduce variation—just the opposite of valuing and adding diversity. To counter this contradiction, valuing diversity efforts must assist, not diminish, the struggle for survival. Otherwise, who needs it! If valuing diversity results in employees feeling they have more rights and less responsibility, who needs it! Worse yet, if valuing diversity results in employees feeling they have more rights when in actuality they have fewer rights and more responsibility, who needs it!

When managers want the best performance, they correctly look for evidence in prior performance, not diversity. Performance is meat and potatoes stuff. Diversity is the dessert. Can valuing diversity be an avenue to performance? I believe it can. HRD scholars and practitioners who want to make a serious contribution to the diversity movement must figure out what diversity brings to the performance table, not what it does to meet the needs of special-interest groups. Without performance as the anchor, valuing diversity becomes the goal instead of the means to achieve the overarching goal. When diversity replaces performance as the goal, the neophyte can be called expert and waste can be called productivity—a corporate version of Orwell's *1984*.

Several years ago, I realized that it was becoming increasingly difficult to talk honestly in our culture about aptitudes as a key element in describing diversity among workers and the causes of performance in the workplace. Highlighting "aptitude" in an explicit human performance model seemed important to me then and seems even more so today (Sisson and Swanson, 1990). If our scientific evidence on diversity in aptitudes and actual performances is set aside for a lower-order agenda of celebrating mythical equality or performance potential, we will cripple our nation, our organizations, and ourselves.

The message for me, a lover of human diversity, is clear. Valuing diversity without performance is a ticket to mediocrity. Valuing diversity with performance could be a ticket to excellence. Logic tells us that organizations are complex, that the problems they face are diverse, and that a competent and diverse work force is required to face the challenge. Our job is to understand better our complex organizations and the expertise required to tackle effectively and efficiently the problems they face. Our goal should be

to learn more about how valuing diversity affects this important work, not to increase our comfort with and acceptance of less than optimum performance.

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### References

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