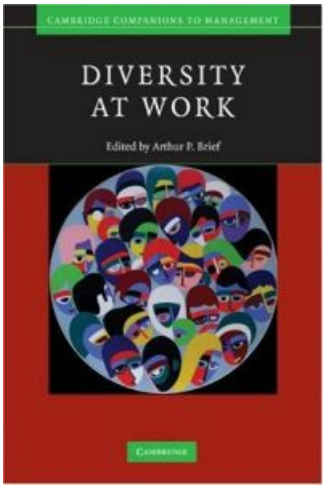

Book Diversity at Work

Arthur P. Brief
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Recommendation

Reading this volume is a bit like panning for gold: You have to sift a lot of dust to find the nuggets, but it is worth it when you do. The reason for the dust and the payoff: This is a collection of academic essays. That means you'll find an abundance of social science jargon, competing terms for similar theories and extensive source citations – but you'll also find sound chapters based on exhaustive, rigorously sorted research that has been analyzed with focus and honesty. Several of these treatises offer advice to organizations about ways to improve their diversity programming. Others cut through some of the ideological buzz surrounding diversity and candidly articulate how being committed to diversity can both enrich and complicate organizational life. *BooksInShort* recommends this compilation, despite its often dense academic prose, to anyone responsible for a diversity program, to human resources officers, and to those interested in teams, corporate culture and workplace ethics.

Take-Aways

- Obtaining good data from companies about diversity is difficult, partially because discrimination is a "touchy," hard-to-discuss topic.
- Diversity can benefit firms by adding broader knowledge and innovation.
- Diversity also can hurt corporate cultures by creating "social divisions" and "dysfunctional…conflict."
- Stereotypes are based on how individuals judge a group's members.
- Conflicts over how a task should be completed can lead to greater team unity, but clashes over processes and relationships intersect with prejudices and cause tension.
- Corporate diversity initiatives have helped minorities get hired, but have been less successful at helping them advance.
- To attract a diverse workforce, show people from different cultures in your recruiting ads.
- To retain a diverse workforce, implement mentoring programs and peer networks.
- Diversity training programs are good for sharing information on employee initiatives, but awareness training tends to be less successful in changing workers' behavior.
- Diversity draws more attention in academic publications than in management literature.

Summary

Scholarship and Workplace Diversity

Workplace diversity and corporate culture receive considerable academic attention. In fact, in the last 10 years, 19% "of the work published in peer-reviewed psychology" journals and 14% of the work in sociology journals have focused on race, gender or the larger category of diversity. However, only 5% of the articles in Academy of Management journals focus on these issues – far fewer than the nature of business demands. Organizations are the locus of great change and ongoing cultural integration, but those who lead this effort need better need theoretical tools. This gap presents an opportunity for scholars to provide insights on matters of great concern to the workplace, where academic findings can immediately apply. Such investigations are crucial for ethical and practical reasons, given the rapidity of change in the world of business. However, from the researcher's point of view, obtaining good data from within companies is difficult, partially because discrimination is a "touchy," hard-to-discuss topic.

> "Race is a charged topic. In the United States, very few people feel comfortable in public discussions of diversity, particularly in terms of race."

One of the first questions to address is how "stereotypes and prejudice create workplace discrimination." Outright racism and blatant harassment still occur on the job, but those problems are easy to recognize. Managers have conceptual and organizational tools for dealing with gross discrimination. Though discrimination has become

subtler over time, stereotypes and prejudice still limit individual and group success. Leaders must learn how to recognize the origin of these forces and the ways they generate discrimination.

> "Organizations are more frequently 'pushed' by external forces into launching diversity initiatives than they are 'pulled' by their internal strategic objectives."

Stereotypes are formed by the way people categorize themselves and other people. In stereotyping, that categorization involves hierarchy (elevating one group above another) and bias (individuals seeing their group as better than other groups). People measure individuals against their expectations about a given "outgroup," ideas which shape how they perceive and interact with members of that group. Stereotypes can distort how employees view each other, generate inaccuracy and evoke troubling, negative emotions.

> "Discrimination on the basis of race or gender, whether implicit or explicit, is still commonplace in many organizations."

Subtle forms of racism may affect even those who see themselves as "nonprejudiced" and who actively think of themselves as egalitarian. People may not be aware that they are ascribing stereotypes to others. For example, someone who uses biased "shifting standards" may evaluate a job applicant by one set of criteria but use a tougher set when considering that person later for promotion. Minorities appear on the "short list" for advancement, but don't end up being chosen.

> "Racism is expressed not just in hostility – but automatically, indirectly, unemotionally and ambivalently – so subtly that the perceiver remains unaware and even the target may not be too sure."

Covert prejudices may distort workplace interaction. One example is the use of "descriptive stereotypes," as seen in sexist attitudes that women "should" have certain traits and "should act, think and feel" in certain ways. Stereotypes influence how those who are typecast act: Labels add another "performance burden," making it harder to do well in the workplace. To fight the negative effects of stereotyping, appeal to people's values, their sense of fairness and their desire to think well of themselves. Guide them to see others as individuals, not mostly as members of specific groups. People do a better job of looking beyond stereotypes when their own fate is bound up in some way with how the "target" of their prejudice fares.

The Impact of Diversity on the Workplace

Scholars have studied various aspects of workplace diversity, but they have turned explicit attention only recently to how increased diversity – and increased emphasis on diversity – affects companies. Several studies show that greater diversity can benefit organizations by widening the "range of knowledge, expertise and perspectives" they can bring to bear on problems. This research finds that teams whose members openly discuss different points of view can create more varied, innovative solutions. That said, increased diversity also can negatively influence organizational culture by leading to more "social divisions" and "dysfunctional forms of conflict." The "similarity-attraction paradigm" argues that people are drawn to others who are like them; this means group divisions and tensions will develop in diversified organizations.

> "Organizational research on cultural diversity in teams has tended to focus both theoretically and empirically on differences."

Scholars divide diversity into broad categories, such as "visible (or surface) diversity," "non-visible (or deep-level diversity)" and "functional diversity." In most cases, you get an immediate impression of individuals' age, race and gender when you first meet – these are perceptible differences. In contrast, variations in values, talent or knowledge are not instantly evident. Visible diversity leads to most common stereotyping and thus receives the most managerial attention.

> "If individuals are not internally motivated to avoid prejudice and the use of stereotypes, intervention could be designed to increase their motivation."

To explain how diversity affects the way organizations function, researchers examine how people interact when divided into groups according to "social categorization theory." Scholars also study "social identity theory," which looks at how people who belong to a group consider themselves positively while depersonalizing and stereotyping those in other groups. Too often, though, researchers doing such analyses focus on "only one demographic characteristic" and ignore other "variables." For instance, they may assume for academic purposes that all women act alike.

> "Diversity attitudes matter because they address not only recruitment but what happens after recruitment."

Organizational culture researchers also examine conflict, which exists in every group. "Task conflicts" are disagreements over how to perform a specific function, while "relationship conflicts" occur when co-workers clash over matters not related to work. "Process conflicts" happen when people disagree over organizational procedures. Such disputes are more akin to relationship conflicts than to task conflicts because how people handle tasks may be rooted in their group identity or culture. Task conflicts can be frustrating, but they also can lead to superior group performance. Relationship conflicts usually harm collective functioning, though they can eventually lead to stronger groups in limited cases. Though not well-researched, process conflict tends to have a negative impact on a work group.

The Recent Past, a Complicated Present and Possible Futures

Before 1964, US companies commonly – and often openly – took race and gender into account when hiring. The passage that year of the milestone Title VII provisions of the US Civil Rights Act made it illegal to discriminate in hiring "on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin." This was a great step forward in establishing an ethical, egalitarian workplace, but while racial and gender segregation decreased markedly "between 1966 and 1980," progress in defeating "black-white segregation" essentially stalled, and, after 1995, even worsened in some areas. Women have fared better than racial minorities, but US employment is still a long way from being gender-neutral.

> "Once diverse job applicants get through the organizational door, the problem becomes one of creating an organizational context in which diverse employees can work together."

Social scientists explain this troubling situation by distinguishing between two elements of workplace diversity: "the gateway to opportunity" and the "pathway to

success and effectiveness." The gateway admits people into an organization – they get interviewed, hired and trained. Early legislation focused on opening gateways for those who had been denied access, and it succeeded. Minority group members were hired for jobs for which they would not have been previously considered – but then they got stuck. Women and people of color were hired but not promoted. Modern diversity efforts focus on developing pathways, helping minorities and women rise through the ranks.

> "Stereotypes come in handy when we meet a new person, and we do not have adequate situational cues about whether that person is friend or foe."

Academics who want to promote workplace diversity should research three areas: how "implicit bias" affects employee behavior, how context affects diversity-related actions and which "strategies and solutions" work best. Unlike overt racism, implicit bias is subtle, often operating below the level of conscious awareness. It affects such functions as "non-verbal behaviors" and social interaction patterns, influences that help shape minority retention and promotion. Context matters; factors like organizational structure often unconsciously communicate attitudes about diversity that impinge on consciously planned programs. A firm's environment plays a major role, including its governing precepts, its customer base and its employees' viewpoints.

What Works to Promote Diversity?

Organizations sponsor diversity initiatives for many reasons, such as legal pressure, the pressure of community activism or institutional pressure (such as from labor unions). Some do it to match their market's demographics or to respond to globalization. Since the late 1980s, the movement toward greater diversity has benefited from the business argument that a diverse workforce provides a deeper, more varied talent pool. Ironically, studies show that diversity initiatives often produce negative results, and can generate more conflict among groups, decreased worker commitment and increased turnover. Generally, firms that try to build workforce diversity find it hard to capitalize on the effort. While diagnosing general needs is easy, determining which activities really promote diversity productively – as opposed to being simply symbolic or gateway acts – is tough. It is hard to determine which ones work best or even work at all.

> "From an immediate perceptual level...people prefer to confirm their stereotypes...even in the face of disconfirming information."

Studies do show that businesses can make themselves more attractive to a diverse workforce in several ways, some of them quite straightforward. For example, analysis indicates that running ads that show black or Hispanic employees makes a company more attractive to students from either background. Active affirmative action programs, in which corporations assertively seek minority group hires, produce measurable "economic and social benefits." Just mentioning such programs in your recruiting material makes your firm more attractive to applicants, especially if you indicate broad support for diversity, not just concerns about race and gender. While social identity theory says people want to work with those who resemble themselves, in practice, using "female and racial minority recruiters" has had mixed results in attracting minority candidates.

> "A diversity initiative can encompass a wide range of specific activities – from recruitment programs or changes in employee benefits, to stand-alone language programs....to large-scale career development programs and mentoring relationships."

Firms generally turn to "diversity training" in two areas. First, managers use it to outline a company's diversity goals and explain how leaders plan to achieve them. Second, organizations use this kind of training to improve the internal relationships among different groups by reshaping "employee behavior." Research is sharply divided on the efficacy of such programs, so it's important to examine your goals and decide what kind of training might be useful in achieving them in your particular environment. For example, diversity training is a good way to distribute information, such as the outline of a new program. Conflict resolution training successfully teaches employees how to handle disputes. "Awareness training" is intended to help people consciously examine their prejudices, since bias can subtly influence behavior. However, studies question the effectiveness of existing models of awareness training, which do not appear to change employees' post-training behavior and which may need a deeper theoretical foundation.

> "Unfortunately, organizations have received little practical guidance on how to choose from the many possibilities available when designing their own diversity management strategies."

Diversity initiatives often include mentoring programs. Some studies say informal mentoring helps protégés more than formal programs, although other research says the quality of the relationship matters most. Unfortunately, this factor varies more in formal mentoring programs than in informal ones. While "demographic similarity" may facilitate the initial connection between mentor and protégé, such homogeneity works against the goals of diversity programs, in that women and minorities who are mentored by white males receive more career benefits.

> "Diversity can lead to better organizational performance...but only if it is effectively managed."

Mentors can help fight workplace stereotypes by coaching their protégés on how to do their tasks well, helping other workers achieve a better understanding of those who are not like them and stepping in to resolve conflict. Since implicit bias can guide promotion decisions, mentors should help influence the way managers decide who will advance. Women, sexual minorities and people of color may find themselves excluded from "informal communication networks," but group mentoring can make up for this, in part. And good "peer relationships" can help reduce turnover.

To make your diversity initiatives more successful, distribute recruiting literature that faithfully indicates your organization's dedication to diversity. Use "skill-based training" to build employees' abilities to address the challenges of diversity. Establish network groups to support new hires and assign mentors who can make sure these employees receive fair evaluations for promotion. Strategically, workplace leaders must strike the right supporting tone both in day-to-day collaborations and at the highest levels of senior management. Help your employees reduce their stereotypical perceptions of other people, a process that will, in part, happen naturally and simply as people cooperate and interact.

About the Author

Arthur P. Brief is a professor of business ethics at the University of Utah and an expert on "the moral dimensions of business life." He also wrote *Attitudes In and Around Organizations*.