



Book The Diversity Code

Unlock the Secrets to Making Differences Work in the Real World

Michelle T. Johnson
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Recommendation

Author Michelle T. Johnson promises not to “sugarcoat diversity,” and she delivers. Johnson – shocking, funny, smart and insightful – has worked as a diversity consultant and employment attorney, and has reflected on her own life and career. She spares no one from her sharp observations, and that’s one of her book’s primary strengths. According to Johnson, you can be in the minority at your workplace and still be part of the problem; you can be in the majority and still exhibit diversity; and you can be a boss who helps or a boss who hinders. Although each of the book’s chapters ends with brief summaries and exercises to help you enact its principles, the text does not offer an easy fix or formula. Johnson leads the reader through the many ways that diversity rubs up against the workplace. She moves from instructive examples to legal implications to hypothetical situations. You might have difficulty translating the book’s ideas into a plan of action, and you might find some of its themes repetitive, but you will be challenged. *BooksInShort* recommends this book, in Johnson’s words, to “leaders as well as regular working stiffs.”

Take-Aways

- Nurturing diversity in the workplace is not the same as avoiding discriminatory practices.
- A workplace sensitized to diversity is more than a workplace whose diversity “numbers look good.”
- In a healthily diverse environment, people don’t judge first and ask questions later.
- To forestall legal trouble (under US antidiscrimination laws), avoid “harming” others; to promote diversity, look to achieve “harmony.”
- Diversity helps create a work environment without discrimination.
- Affirmative action aims for fairness and an “authentically diverse” hiring pool.
- Your reviews should measure how well your employees “get along with others.”
- Welcome the company outcast as a way of truly embracing diversity.
- Deal with discriminatory issues objectively and professionally, and involve human resources as early as possible.
- If necessary, implement investigative teams that are diverse themselves.

Summary

The Appearance of Diversity

Diversity, with its myriad workplace issues, can feel like a “big encrypted code.” Although related to laws that steer you and your company away from discriminatory action, diversity exists in its own domain. “Many attempt...to act like differences don’t exist. After all, if you don’t notice differences, you can never be accused of treating people differently.” Though based on simple concepts, diversity can be difficult in practice. Trying to understand people and to empathize with them is more art

than science.

“You can’t fight fire with fire, and you can’t melt bigotry away with bigotry.”

Workplaces can appear diverse “when the numbers look good” but still not function in a way that allows diversity to flourish. You have to craft an environment that helps employees see other people’s “differences, distinctions and dividing lines with a soft gaze but with clear vision.” Quick judgments help no one in the quest for diversity. Thoughtfully considering what you think about people does help. In fact, it’s paramount. When most people reflect on diversity and what they hope to accomplish in the workplace, they develop a mental picture, a “norm,” and then proceed from there. But norms can be dangerous because they can come between you and your co-workers. If you expect a person to act in a certain way without understanding and honoring his or her individual “story,” you move into the dangerous territory of developing unshakable beliefs based on categorizations.

The Law and Diversity, Part 1

You might be interested in diversity because you hope to avoid potentially costly lawsuits that arise when discrimination rears its ugly head. A quick tour of US federal law reveals that you cannot discriminate based on “race, color, religion, sex (gender) or national origin.” You cannot alter your behavior toward “qualified individuals with disabilities” or individuals “40 years of age or older.” This list covers the basic “protected classes.” Discriminatory actions include making distinctions in activities such as “hiring and firing,” access to “job advertisements” and “compensation” practices.

“For many in the workplace, issues of diversity – sometimes even outright discrimination – remain personal issues that aren’t treated as personnel issues.”

So everyone in the workforce is theoretically covered. But encouraging diversity lies in reading between the lines of the law, in trying to promote “positive understanding on the basis of both the legally protected classes and the groups not protected by law.”

When it comes to groups of people who are unlike you, you can hold any opinions about them that you like. But you can’t voice or act upon negative opinions in the workplace. If you sow discomfort among people because of their race or gender, or make important management decisions on that basis, you have crossed the line. Developing an appreciation of diversity is the preventive action you should take. Learning and understanding can help change your ways before something negative you think becomes something negative you do. Discrimination hinges on “harm” and diversity strives for “harmony.” While a state of harmony can certainly prevent harm, the harmony deriving from diversity also has a higher aspiration – “promoting understanding and cohesiveness.”

The Law and Diversity, Part 2

Affirmative action is often misunderstood, but it also has higher aspirations. With the purpose of providing equal access, affirmative action sought to remedy the discrimination that for many years blocked women and minorities in the US from even applying for jobs. Despite the stereotypes attached to affirmative action, it can function perfectly and lead to the hiring of someone of any race. Affirmative action helps organizations “create a diverse hiring pool.” Establishing an “authentically diverse” workplace is what matters.

“You can pick the people you date, the people you may eventually marry, your neighborhoods, your friends, your places of worship, and your social clubs, but just like with family, you can’t pick who will compose the landscape of your work day.”

Good diversity practices move beyond the legal domain. They require you to tangle with differences that the law does not specifically protect. Welcome the company outcast as a way of truly embracing and promoting diversity. Be sensitive to “the ways people show differences in the workplace.” Exhibit understanding toward those distinctions. Exercise patience toward those you attempt to understand.

“Diversity isn’t always comfortable. It’s about people learning to appreciate the way others are different.”

You should strive for true diversity in the workplace, rather than just following the law, because diversity will help you to create a “positive environment” rather than just a compliant one. Remember, “you can legally comply with the law but still be really, really lousy at promoting diversity in your workplace.”

Questions, Stumbling Blocks and Solutions

Supporting diversity (and an understanding of diversity in yourself and your employees) matters because the landscape of diversity constantly changes. You can’t check it off a list, considering how demographics alter or will mutate in the future. Your workforce members are not all the same, and treating them as if they were is disrespectful. Seeing people as individuals, without judgment, is the highest form of respect.

“Part of fairness involves people who are minority group members remembering that their differences don’t give them any license to marginalize the differences of others.”

Do your performance evaluations measure how well your employees “get along with others?” They should. Do you know how to pronounce correctly your co-workers’ last names, even if they sound unfamiliar to you? You must. Do you control yourself at work, and avoid spouting off about religion or politics in a way that might alienate someone without your realizing? Do you understand how all groups contribute to the diversity of your workplace? White people demonstrate their own diversity – in religion, for example – and that diversity is part of the ever-changing job landscape. Boasting a close relationship with one person from a “minority group” does not let you off the hook for exhibiting biases. And being a member of a minority group does not grant you a free pass when it comes to engaging in discrimination.

“Confusing exposure to another culture with deep understanding of that culture can come off as paternalistic at worst, benignly insensitive at best.”

Work to understand differences. Engage in “an ongoing, conscious desire to have a sensitive awareness” of your co-workers. Listening, asking questions, trying to identify what people bring to the table – these practices matter. And you should strive for compassion that shows you care about the people with whom you work and seek to understand them.

“Change can be risky to people.”

Understand what pushes your colleagues’ buttons, or worse, offends them deeply. If you take a conversation into territory that a colleague might consider off-putting, then you must deal with the consequences. If you ask a colleague from the opposite sex to lunch (in a company where this seldom happens), don’t be surprised when people ask questions about the relationship. When you enter a workplace, be aware of the “norm of workplace bonding” and “exercise good judgment.”

Leadership and Diversity

Everyone brings a “brand of difference” to the workplace. Managing those differences helps create a competent workplace. Different leadership groups have different parts to play. Your human resources (HR) department is critical to your company’s diversity efforts. HR professionals need to make conscious efforts to know your employees; they should keep their eyes on people and on potential problems related to diversity. Managers also have a responsibility to stay alert to relationships. They need to monitor the workplace for potential issues. And they have to “invite trust” without being so friendly that they no longer hold authority. Being “interested and approachable” is a better stance. Creating “an environment with an open door” should be a baseline goal for all managers and department heads.

“People with the status of majority dominance don’t like to feel uncomfortable or deal with any change that upsets that balance.”

The CEO and other “top dogs” should aim for slightly different goals. They can’t just talk about the diversity policy. They can’t just create a “glossy diversity brochure” and be done with it. People, and their differences, have to matter as much as the other items on which executives focus. They have to show their employees that they do more than pay lip service to diversity. And they must know that diversity doesn’t just involve certain groups and not others. It’s about “fair treatment” for all, but like it or not, some groups exhibit “dominance” in the workplace. The dominant demographic looks around, sees others like them, and thus gains “instant credibility.” If you try to challenge the pattern of dominance and “privilege,” you surely will run into some pushback, spoken or unspoken.

“[While] many companies have become masters at recruiting, it’s retention that tells the story of how well diversity is really working when it comes to certain groups.”

“Affinity groups” in the office can help. An affinity group should be “employee endorsed” and allow for a “shared membership.” Affinity groups exclude some people. For example, an “outsider” may not appropriately attend an affinity group meeting. It changes the meeting and affects members’ ability to seek the support that they might truly need from the group. Affinity groups aren’t about keeping people out; they seek to improve the “work experience” of their members by providing an outlet for them to deal with issues particular and specific to them.

Raising Issues, Handling Issues

If, in spite of your efforts to promote diversity, an employee accuses you of being “culturally insensitive,” or worse, discriminatory, the first thing to know is that “defensiveness is irrelevant.” You have to try to understand the accusation. Make sure that you don’t repeat the behavior that created the problem. Recognize that “someone felt offended by what you said or did.” Apologize for the “impact” and then let someone else know about the incident – “your supervisor, the supervisor of your fellow employee or the HR department.” Handling these issues with sensitivity can be productive; the offended person will feel supported and you will help maintain a sense of workplace safety.

“When it comes to diversity...the things we notice are the things that we probably most need to work on ourselves.”

If, on the other hand, you are the offended person, be careful not to fight fire with fire. Calling someone a “racist” or a “bigot” is a serious accusation. Make sure any allegation is based in fact, or else the offender is unlikely to listen to you. Making a claim of discrimination requires finesse. If you want to charge your manager with bias, going to another manager will not always help. Many times, “management tends to back up management,” so approach HR first. Having a witness with some pull in the company also is important, although not always possible. You want the whole situation handled in an objective, professional manner. Aim for “good communication and a fair opportunity to be heard.”

“Good workplace diversity...focuses...on promoting understanding and cohesiveness.”

Finally, if you are in a management position and a diversity issue seems to be reaching the “boiling point,” resort to an established process, beginning with HR. Preferably, assign more than one “investigator,” and ensure “balance” on the investigative team in terms of “gender and ethnicity.” That balance will allow the people who need to speak to the investigators a “choice” of the person to whom they feel most comfortable speaking.

Reporting on Diversity

If your company issues a “diversity report,” make sure it is a real tool and not a showpiece. First, consider how often you should publish it. Frequent circulation will help you to demonstrate “ongoing commitment.” Second, explain how diversity ties into the company’s business objectives. Next, if you’re going to “grade yourself” on your diversity efforts, make sure you hear your employees’ opinions by conducting a survey. Your statistical reports should include some data on retention of minority employees and possibly an indication of the number of diversity-related complaints the company receives. Regardless of what you include in the report, make sure your publicity about diversity aligns with the experience of working in your company.

“At the end of the day, with true diversity, the code is getting in the habit of recognizing the differences in others, being able to manage those differences and feeling comfortable doing so.”

Even if such a report enhances your credibility, don’t think that you’re done with diversity issues. There is no “end point” to diversity; it requires “constant vigilance.” You might think you have a fairly diverse workforce, but how does it compare to the demographics of your city or region? Are your evaluations fair and consistent, regardless of whom you or your staff are evaluating? These are tough, ongoing, important questions, but diversity is tough, ongoing, important work.

About the Author

Michelle T. Johnson writes the “Diversity Diva” newspaper column for the *Kansas City Star*.
