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Transformative Multiculturalism in the Workplace: Framing Training Initiatives

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### **Abstract**

Multicultural training is often delivered as off-the-shelf training that is conducted within the workplace for reasons related to compliance, employee engagement workshops, and to fulfill the status quo. Yet, in many cases, the training is not framed to produce change in knowledge, skill, and awareness, nor is it long-standing within the workplace. As the workforce continues to diversify, managers will need to develop and apply competencies for managing a diverse workforce. This can be achieved through the development of transformative multiculturalism management training series workshops that cover topics that enable managers foster an organizational learning culture that is empowered by differences.

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### **Transformative Multiculturalism in the Workplace: Framing Training Initiatives**

Multiculturalism training can be a stressful experience for employees. In some workplace settings, employees dread this training that is often an annual mandatory workshop aimed to maintain workplace compliance. These trainings may be an uncomfortable event due to the typical concepts and discussions of race, inequality, and discrimination, where employees aren't properly introduced to the notions of what multiculturalism really is. In addition, these learning events may be perceived as an elementary level workshop where employees exchange trivial information with one another about their racial, gender, and age differences etc., and participate in commonality activities in hopes to bridge social gaps among employees within the organization. It should be noted that the intentions of the instructional designers that develop these diversity training curriculums is to espouse positive learning outcomes that produce healthy work environments. However, too often these trainings fall short on producing conclusive organizational change that meet the goal for transformative multiculturalism in the workplace. Organizational learning can be achieved through the exchange of various cultural perspectives that results in the collaboration and development of new knowledge (Gordon, Kasworm, & Rose, 2010), which is directly tied to the goals of transformative multiculturalism.

### **Transformative Multiculturalism**

Learning outcomes for multicultural learning must be conceptualized, clear, and concise prior to development of the curriculum. If multicultural learning opportunities are going to be developed for employees, the definition and idea of what multiculturalism

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within the workplace means must be definitive. At a superficial level, multicultural education is often perceived as the discussion and sharing of differences related (mostly to) race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and ability. It is through light discussions that these differences are buried and the focus on similarities is highlighted; all in the name of maintaining peace, and not to “stir the waters.” As Nieto and Bode (2008) state, “treating everyone in the same way will not necessarily lead to equality, rather it may end up perpetuating the inequality that already exist” (p. 170). This is because differences aren’t highlighted, resulting in the loss of an opportunity for other ethnic groups to feel empowered by their differences, and for the majority group to be enlightened by another perspective. Multiculturalism must be viewed within the organization as more than a “black and white” debate of race. Other races and ethnicities need to be incorporated, as well as social identify, categories and societal constructions.

A transformative multicultural approach does more than distinguish similarities and highlight differences among groups and glean small elements of ethnic perspectives into mainstream curriculum, such as holidays, festivities, cuisine etc. Rather, a transformative approach to multicultural education reform “...changes the basic assumptions of the curriculum and enables students to view concepts, issues, themes, and problems from several ethnic perspectives and points of view” (Banks, p.250). Multicultural trainings that are framed to encourage the perspectives and outlooks of others, will offer the exchange, and possibly the adaptation of other viewpoints. When developing multicultural training within the workplace, “...the goal should be to enable students to view concepts and issues from more than one perspective and from the point of view of the cultural, ethnic, and racial groups that were the most active participants in, or were most cogently influenced

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by, the event, issue, or concept being studied” (Banks). An instructional designer would need to ensure that the development of the curriculum, activities, discussion questions, and reflective learning is not mainstream-centric. A mainstream-centric curriculum also denies majority groups the opportunities to view the perspectives of other cultures and groups. This causes individuals of color to feel alienated and disenfranchised as their experiences, cultures, opinions, ideas, and thoughts are not the focal point. While Banks (1993) relates this context to how teachers must frame learning for students, the same may be applied to adult learners.

As a designer of learning it is essential to frame multicultural learning opportunities so that the curriculum is constructed in such a way that individuals are “learning to affirm differences rather than deny them” (p. 170), as this supports the development of the multicultural perspective. It is imperative to acknowledge that employees have differences in gender, race, ethnicity, language, social class, sexual orientation, abilities, and talents. Not acknowledging these differences leads to the perception on “deficiencies within cultural groups when they are not perceived as the “norm” (Nieto and Bode, 2008) Notably, this effort is difficult as “part of the U.S. history has been to disregard differences and as it could have negative effects on fostering a country built on harmony” (p. 170). Designers of multicultural training must push past these ideas, habits, and sentiments and work to develop meaningful learning outcomes for employees that will (1) develop the multicultural perspective, (2) reframe social structures for social justice, and (3) establish ethnic differences as a means of seeing different worldviews.

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### **Education as a Process for Social Justice**

Applying multiculturalism to the workplace needs to be viewed as an ongoing process that continues to be reformed and shaped. There is no one-fix solution or simple method to developing this process and to develop social justice opportunities for employees. "Curriculum and materials represent the content of multicultural education, but multicultural education is, above all a process, that is, it is ongoing and dynamic. No one ever stops becoming a multicultural person, and knowledge is never complete" (Nieto & Bode, 2005, p.54). Social justice requires individuals to embark on critical reflection of their own behavior, privilege deemed by race, gender, class, sexual orientation etc. and to be vigilant in the goal to disperse resources and resources fairly. Critical reflection is an essential component to transformational learning. "The purpose of reflective practice in a group is not in needing to be right or in winning but in openness to a variety of perspectives, for it is only in openness that new understandings occur" (York-Barr et al., 2001) cited in (Baumgartner, Caffarella, & Merriam, 2007). "The dimensions of multicultural education as a process is too often relegated to a secondary position, because content is easier to handle and has speedier results" (Nieto & Bode, pg. 54). As educators, we must push through the notion or demoting deeper and richer topics. There is an empowering force within multiculturalism, as "multicultural education invites students and teachers to put there learning into action for social justice" (Nieto & Bode, 2005, p. 54). If trainings are developed to be one-sided and U.S., based, it may develop resentment among the participants because of the one-sided U.S. worldview discussions, or high-level glances of ethnic groups. In other cases, employees of the dominant group may feel targeted during these trainings due to the history of the country and the relation to slavery,

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racism, segregation, violence, and systematic discrimination still prevalent today, and the involvement of the dominant group. The goal is to develop a diversity and multicultural training series that removes these tensions and allows employees to learn, adapt, and implement multiculturalism in the workplace. This will be achieved by incorporating adult education frameworks, experiential learning, transformational learning, and multicultural learning models and practices. The true focus will be on bringing forth awareness and applying critical reflection and journaling as the method to evoke change in attitude, perceptions, and behavior. The utilization of metaphoric framing will frame the learning environment in a positive light where all participants are equal.

### **Multiculturalism in the Workplace Training Plan**

The training plan for the implementation of multiculturalism in the workplace is to do more than reflect diversity through recruitment of the workforce and create a one-size fits all training workshop. There are specific skill-sets that employees and management need to obtain. The goal is to develop a workshop training series for both employees and management teams. The first-level goal is to train all employees (including management) on four multicultural topics: (1) exploring culture, self-understanding, and intercultural awareness, (2) social identity and various social categories, (3) privilege and power (4) social justice and equity. With the growing diversity in the U.S., the workforce needs to develop an understanding of diversity and equity. Employees need to be able to analyze their place within the cultural society and to also examine how institutions (in this case workplace) provide both equitable and inequitable opportunities for employees. These circumstances occur both intentionally and unintentionally, and being prepared to deal with these situations is critical. The second-level goal, is exclusively for the management

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team, which is driven towards developing competencies and skills for managing a diverse workforce, (1) develop effective multicultural teams, (2) mediating multicultural conflict (3) commitment to continuing the strive for cultural competence. Both tracks are developed with the framework of producing change within the three domains of knowledge, skill, and awareness (KSAs). Therefore, if institutions – in this context the reference of workplace – take initiatives to support transformational multiculturalism and reform, then that is a contribution.

As a society at large, both training tracks for (employer and management) aid in meeting the growing diversity of the workforce. With the growing diversity in the U.S., the workforce needs to develop an understanding of diversity and equity. Employees need have the ability to consider their place within the cultural society and to also examine how the workplace provides just and unjust opportunities. “A powerful and liberating alternative comes from the fact that we’re always participating in something larger than ourselves, social systems. To understand privilege and oppression, we have to look at what we’re participating in and how we participate in relation to paths of least resistance” (Johnson, 2006, p. 127). By cultivating a workplace that strives for social equity through partnership and in a non-threatening and punitive fashion, the skills and attributes employees contain will reflect through organization through productivity, less turnover, and a positive work environment. Furthermore, building the awareness in individuals to notice elements of inequality and injustice within the workplace, and to be attentive and expose these situations.

There are several ideas that must be incorporated to implement this training plan. First, the implementation of multicultural and social reconstruction (Stuhr, 1994) is

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considered. The notion of conflict being an opportunity for growth must be present within the learning environments. As classroom discussion and critical reflection opportunities are provided, natural conflict will arise when ideas are shared related to privilege, social categories of race, gender, sexual orientation, and various other social categories. “A conceptual analysis of conflict is crucial to understanding of multicultural subject matter...” (Stuhr, 1994, p. 176). Second, leadership must be prepared for the action of social reconstruction, as the trainings will prepare the workers to challenge implications of social and structural inequality within the workplace. The information and knowledge that employees will obtain upon the completion of these workshops will foster some heated debate and discussion that will motivate and drive the need for structural change. Grant and Sleeter state “the reconstructionist approach educates students to become critical thinkers capable of examining their life experiences and the social division that keep them in their group from fully enjoying the social and economic rewards of the United States (as cited in Stuhr, 1994, p. 172). Framing the learning environment and preparing the employees and managers with the skills to handle and resolve conflict in a healthy way will at a larger scale, affect societal change towards social justice, in that change occurs in phases. For a detailed description of the training plan, including learning objectives, methods, structure, and time-frame, see Appendix A.

### **Preparation for Implementation, Limitation and Constraints**

In preparation for the learning, buy-in from leadership has been approved, as part of the strategic planning initiative. The introduction to the training workshops will be distributed to employees throughout the organization, announcing the incorporation of multiculturalism training throughout the organization. The outline of the workshops and

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learning outcomes will be described and employee will be given instructions on how to sign-up. To gain popularity of the workshops among the employees, the training department will hold weekly lunch-and-learn forums leading up to the date of the multiculturalism training roll-out on topics related to the benefits of multiculturalism in the workplace. Having forum discussions on concerns, thoughts, and ideas of multiculturalism, will provide opportunities for the instructional designers to develop “real-life” case study scenarios for the workshops. These forums will be helpful in creating a buzz throughout the organization and spread the concept and introduce multiculturalism within the workplace.

There are many obstacles that are predicted. Within the organization, management is predominately white, so it is imperative to foster a positive and safe learning environment, as many of them may feel defensive when discussions regarding privilege, racism, discrimination, and oppression are discussed. The facilitator will need to be knowledgeable and attentive to these dynamics and ensure that a workshop objectives and expectations are clearly outlined to eliminate these tensions. Once the workshops have deployed, it will be imperative to obtain immediate feedback from the learners, as the workshops are six hours in duration. The usage of critical incident questionnaires (CIQs) (adapted by Steven Brookfield, will be useful to obtain immediate feedback from the learners, as these can be distributed and retrieved from learners during the workshop, and shared back with the group. This will allow the facilitator to assess areas of concern, confusion etc. as been deployed. CIQs are helpful for facilitators as they can implement the exchange of anonymous feedback throughout the workshop, as opposed to the typical level 1 smile sheets that measure the satisfaction of employees at the end of the workshop. The

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follow-up process after all phases of the implementation process will be to continue to work with the learning teams and management teams on the action items that were disclosed during the training. As noted, transformational learning works to bridge social gaps by creating change in societal and institutional structures in effort for social justice.

While the limitations and constraints can be predicted, there will be situations within the learning environments that one cannot predict. The best practice to handle these situations is to remain factual, genuine, and authentic within the learning environment. Learners need to feel empowered, validated, and safe within the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

When multicultural training is customized and catered to the culture of an organization, and crafted with the intention to disclose concerns, explore various perspectives, and espouse change; then the space for transformational multiculturalism is present.

Employees within an organization, or all races, genders, ethnicities, social classes, sexual orientation etc. need to work collaboratively to reflect on their stance within the society, and to strive towards social justice for all.

## Appendix A Training Outline

**Task:** Develop Transformative Multicultural Training within the Workplace

### Learning Objectives and Core Competencies

**Develop two training tracks for Transformative Multicultural training:**

- I. First-level training (for all employees including management) on four multicultural topics:

Competencies for employee workshops:

- a. Explore culture, self-understanding, and intercultural awareness
- b. Identify social identity and various social categories
- c. Analyze privilege and power within the workplace
- d. Establish actions for social justice and equity

- II. Second-level training (for management only)

Competencies for management workshops:

- a. Develop effective multicultural teams
- b. Identify methods for mediating multicultural conflict
- c. Establish commitment to continuing cultural competence

### Core Competencies

Each workshop builds on the three domains of developing knowledge, skill, and awareness (KSAs).

Knowledge – needed to learn factual information about various ethnicities, gender roles, sexual orientation, and social class and how each can be effective contributing factors in offering various perspectives.

Skills – develop/increase the level of cultural competence, increase strategic problem-solving, and cultivate professional workplace relationships.

Awareness – developing self-awareness of prejudices, stereotypes, fears of other groups, and emphasis on reflecting on how these differences can positively impact an organizational culture and professional workplace relationships.

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### **Methods:**

**Delivery:** Workshops will be delivered by method of instructor-led.

**Time:** duration of each workshop is 6 hours.

**Learning strategies:** usage of case studies, role-plays, experiential learning activities, reflective journaling, and discussion on action plans and transformational learning

### **Structure of learning:**

Content, group discussions, group-work, and individual post-work assignments will be constructed to meet the needs of adult learners. Methods include:

- Experiential learning: where learners will reflect on past experiences and share worldviews
- Metaphoric framing: for discussions on privilege, oppression, and discrimination, the usage of metaphoric framing will lessen the tension of the discussion, by providing examples where learners of all groups can relate
- Critical reflection: learners will have opportunities to relate learning outcomes to real-life and contemplate next steps.
- Transformation learning: learners will have opportunities to work with work-teams to devise action plans to address institutional concerns and follow-up.

### **Post-Course**

Feedback/Follow-up process:

- I. For management – weekly onsite and coaching provided by assigned department consultant to review of action plans
- II. For employees – management will meet weekly with established work-teams to review action items developed. Review of these items will be raised to Senior Leadership for monthly review.

### **Pre-Course**

Readings & self-assessment on multiculturalism provided to employees and managers. Self-assessment will be reviewed during first workshop.

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