



LEARNING TO VALUE DIFFERENCES

Among the complexities facing healthcare administrators is the increasing cultural diversity of the U.S. labor force. The percentage of white men in the work force is projected to be 38.1 percent in 2005, down from 43.1 percent in 1990, according to the *Kiplinger Washington Letter* (December 27, 1991). A less dramatic decline (0.6 percent) will occur for white women. However, the percentage of black, Hispanic, and Asian and other men and women in the work force will increase by the year 2005, and minorities will make up one-third of the labor force by 2010.

Many healthcare organizations are adopting plans to help leaders manage culturally diverse groups of employees and to ensure the organization continues to attract and retain employees of all cultures through the turn of the century.

Implementing a diversity plan at Mercy Health Services corporate headquarters in Farmington Hills, MI, was an intense educational experience for managers and other employees. This article describes Mercy's education program, which was designed to enhance manager and employee awareness of their own biases and those of others and to build skills in dealing with persons from a variety of cultures.

PERCEPTIONS OF UNFAIRNESS

Most Mercy Health Services employees uphold the organization's strong ethical and moral val-

A Catholic Healthcare System Implements A Cultural Diversity Education Program

BY KATHRYN
COMER PEEL

ues. Equity and fairness are thus an integral part of most managers' and employees' actions and behaviors. They want to "do the right thing,"

Summary Each year the U.S. labor force is becoming increasingly diverse. Many healthcare organizations are adopting plans to meet the needs of leaders who manage culturally diverse groups of employees and to ensure that the organization can continue to attract and retain employees of all cultures.

In December 1988 Mercy Health Services, Farmington Hills, MI, began a cultural diversity program to increase the number of minority and women employees, especially in management and leadership positions. Its education program was designed to enhance manager and employee awareness of their own biases and those of others and to build skills in dealing with persons from a variety of cultures.

Mercy Health Services first held 90-minute educational sessions for managers. The sessions covered expected demographic changes and the importance of working together. Employees then attended sessions where they practiced interactive exercises to help each person recognize his or her own biases.

In the subsequent weeks the corporate human resources staff experienced an increase in the number of employee relations problems managers and nonmanagers attributed to diversity conflict. In response, Mercy developed a pilot series of awareness- and skill-building workshops for those who managed Mercy's most culturally diverse staffs. They heard lectures on racial and gender issues and watched and discussed conflict resolution videos. Most workshop participants increased their awareness of cultural bias and their commitment to learning and practicing skills to deal with conflict.



Ms. Peel is director, Corporate Office Human Resource Services, Mercy Health Services, Farmington Hills, MI.



but a lack of knowledge and understanding about the right frame of reference can lead to diversity-related problems.

Although books, consultants, and educational tools are available to help an organization develop a solid cultural diversity plan, few resources have the extensive track records to guide an organization through its own complex diversity issues.

In working through human relations matters, Mercy Health Services found that the diversity issues our managers face, such as perceptions of unfairness in hiring, policy enforcement, and interpersonal conflicts, may stem from bias and prejudice held by individual employees. Trying to change these beliefs or help employees become more aware of them has proved to be a formidable task. However, changing employees' beliefs about co-workers' differences may be necessary to operationalize a diverse work force model.

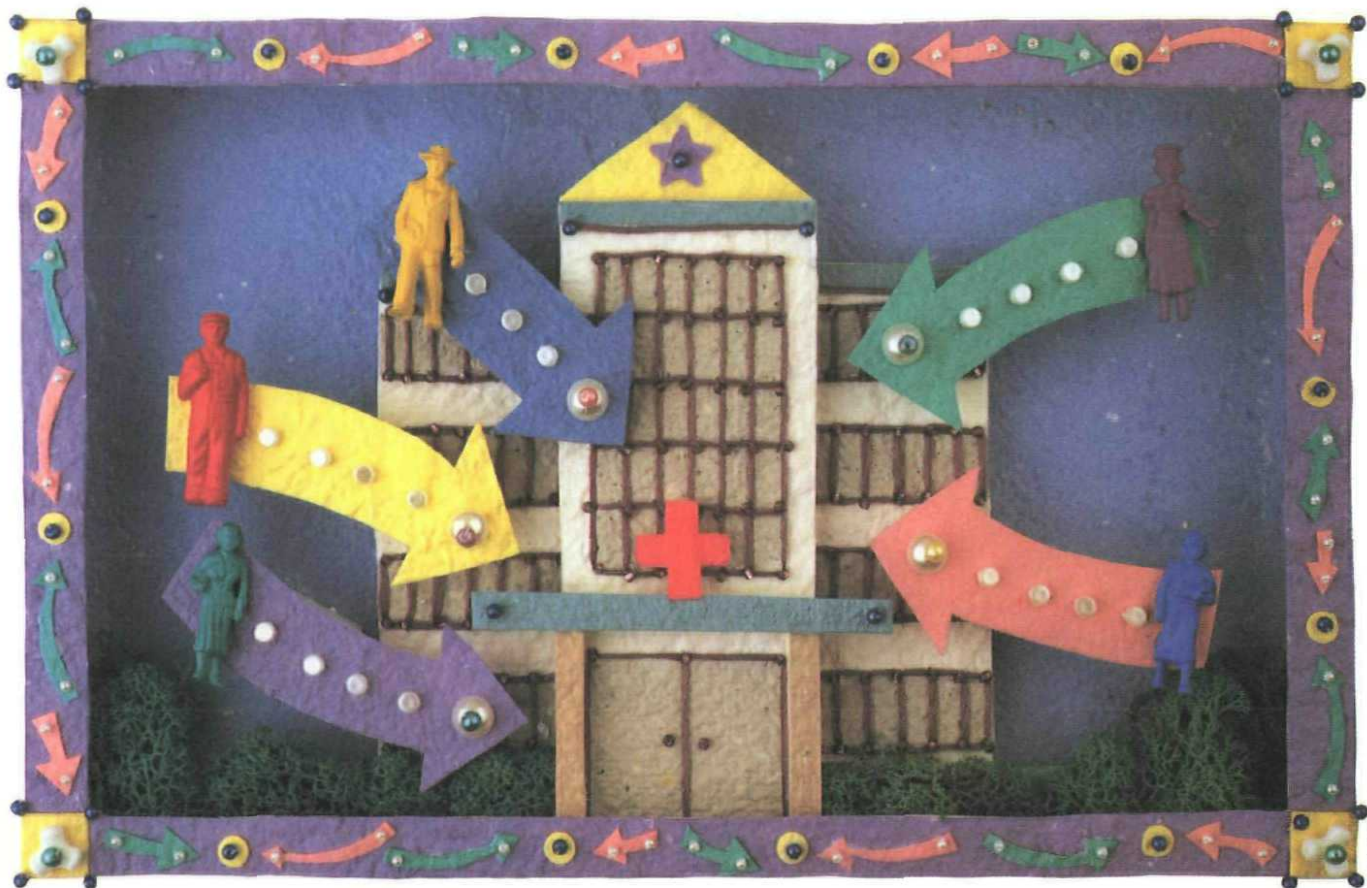
Although Mercy Health Services does not have a history of discrimination, the board approved a work force diversity plan in December 1988 (see

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"Diversity in the Workplace," *Health Progress*, March 1991, p. 82). The purpose of the plan is to improve the employment rate of women and minority managers. Each year the organization identifies and analyzes the representation of women and minorities employed at Mercy's headquarters (which includes corporate staff and staff of Mercy Alternative, a subsidiary of the healthcare system).

In addition to the education program, the work force diversity plan calls for:

- Implementing recruitment advertising strategies to increase the number of qualified minority and women applicants
- Monitoring, evaluating, and reporting the program's progress
- Locating candidates through professional organizations for women and minorities
- Auditing major in-house human resource systems in light of achieving diversity
- Further developing and strengthening programs for employees' continued professional



Linda Solovic



development, such as tuition assistance and professional organization membership sponsorship

- Developing programs to attract minorities to the healthcare field, such as a scholarship program for healthcare administration

EDUCATIONAL SESSIONS

Mercy Health Services' first step in implementing its cultural diversity program at the corporate offices was to hold 90-minute educational sessions for managers. Managers learned about the demographic changes expected to take place before 2000 and the importance of working together, valuing and managing the uniqueness of each Mercy employee.

Session participants watched a video of managers and employees in workplace situations requiring sensitivity to and understanding of people from diverse backgrounds. After the video, participants discussed what managers need to be aware of in such situations and how to resolve conflicts before they become overwhelming.

The management sessions were followed by similar sessions for 400 other employees from a

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variety of cultures. In these sessions employees practiced interactive exercises to help each person recognize his or her own biases.

Feedback Session leaders asked participants in the management sessions for their feedback, in person or by anonymous evaluation. The responses varied:

- Some managers applauded the organization for proactively addressing these issues.

- Some men (managers and employees) felt threatened by their diminishing numbers and power.

- Some managers were anxious to learn more about various cultures and races, their own perceptions, and how to successfully manage a diverse work group.

- Some managers felt unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with employees so different from themselves.

- Some less-experienced managers were upset at the prospect of dealing with diversity-based conflict.

Nonmanagers reacted similarly:

- Some of them resented being asked to share

WORKSHOPS' GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

GOALS

The goals of Mercy Health Services' six workshops on cultural diversity were:

- To increase managers' awareness of their role in achieving corporate diversity goals
- To increase managers' understanding of issues related to diversity in the workplace
- To provide managers with the tools and strategies for managing a diverse work force

OBJECTIVES

The workshops were interactive sessions with the consultant and human resources professional staff as facilitators. Objectives for each session were as follows.

Session 1

- To describe the changing demographics that continue to affect the work force
- To describe the corporate diversity

plan, its history, current activities, and the next steps

- To identify managers' responsibilities for the implementation of the plan
- To allow managers to share personal experiences and reactions that have shaped their perceptions about various races, cultures, and about gender

Session 2

- To identify communications issues that exist in a multicultural environment, such as some assumptions we make through communication, language barriers, and how managers can improve communications

Session 3

- To teach managers how to enhance employees' sense of being part of a team by being able to resolve conflicts within a team, by recognizing when cultural factors are at the root of a workplace conflict, and by learning how to resolve a conflict when differences are a central issue

Session 4

- To enable managers to promote teamwork by teaching them how informal groups at work may exclude persons because of cultural or ethnic differences, describing how productivity and job satisfaction are connected to shared group identities at work, and teaching coaching and team-building skills to help excluded individuals overcome the barriers

Session 5

- To teach managers how to give negative feedback in a culturally diverse work group

Session 6

- To summarize previous sessions
- To reinforce the administration's commitment to the cultural diversity plan
- To help managers develop an action plan to internalize diversity skill building and awareness activities within their work groups



their beliefs with people they did not know.

- Some minority employees reacted positively, seeing these efforts as an opportunity for advancement within the organization.

- Some older white women did not understand the need for education in cultural diversity.

More Problems In the subsequent weeks the corporate human resources staff experienced an increase in the number of employee relations problems managers and nonmanagers raised and attributed to diversity conflict, particularly in the operating groups with the most culturally diverse staffs. Several managers were reluctant to take normal, corrective actions for fear they would be accused of discrimination.

Even though nonmanagers had become more aware of bias in the workplace, managers and human resource personnel had not mastered the skills to effectively handle the subtleties of diversity conflicts. If we were to begin again, we would take a defined group of managers through sessions on awareness, skill development, and practice before discussing cultural awareness and sensitivity with their employees.

DIVERSITY WORKSHOPS

Unable to undo what had been done, human resource development specialists and I quickly developed a pilot series of six three-hour awareness- and skill-building workshops for corporate and operating managers who have the most diverse staffs and therefore most often confront diversity issues (see **Box** on p. 46). Attendance at the workshops was strongly encouraged.

A planning and facilitation team from the Human Resources Department was formed. To demonstrate the value of diversity, the facilitation team was culturally diverse. It included a local black diversity consultant who had worked with the Mercy Health Services board and had been active in local community diversity projects. The consultant lectured on racial and gender issues. The team used video-assisted instruction modules and presented a conflict resolution model.

Concurrently, the planning and facilitation team and I sought and received unequivocal support from the chief executive officer of Mercy Alternative. He expressed his support of the organization's diversity goals and the upcoming workshops through a letter to all managers and addressed the managers at the first workshop. He discussed his experience in learning to work with a culturally diverse group of employees on the West Coast. He explained that Mercy's customer

A MAJORITY OF MINORITIES

During the next 15 years healthcare organizations will have to be aggressive in attracting and retaining employees, especially minorities, who by 2005 will make up one-third of work force entrants, reports the *Kiplinger Washington Letter* (December 27, 1991).

Many minorities will be poorly educated and need training before taking on even basic jobs. Healthcare organizations arranging for employees' classes in English, math, and other skills will find that such efforts pay off when trying to attract and retain minority employees, notes *Kiplinger*.

Our nation accepts about a million immigrants each year, according to *Kiplinger*. In 1990 the population was composed of:

- Seventy-five percent white
- Twelve percent black
- Nine percent Hispanic
- Three percent Asian
- One percent Native American

The report projects that by 2010 the percentage of whites in the United States will drop to 66 percent, whereas the number of persons from other ethnic groups will either increase or remain the same. "More of your workers will be immigrants," notes the report.

Immigrants were previously "eager to blend in, become assimilated, learn the language and American ways of doing things," it continues. Today, however, many immigrants are not so yielding and want to retain their language and customs. Employers who are sensitive to this will find ways to accommodate employees' requests to carry on some of their most important customs and thus build a loyal work force—a work force in whom they may have invested time and money for special job training.

base is also becoming more diverse and that learning to work with and value people of different racial and ethnic groups would have a positive effect on operations, internally and externally.

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THE RESULTS

At the last workshop, facilitators were encouraged by the group's high energy level and enthusiasm. Managers determined what their next steps should be and accepted responsibility for ensuring they occurred. The steps included:

- Developing and practicing realistic scenarios to improve skills in confronting issues effectively
- Organizing coaching and mentoring classes to allow managers to check their perceptions with peers
- Providing information on various cultures to each other and staff
- Creating opportunities for more interaction among diverse groups



- Confronting diversity issues when they occur

Human resource staff agreed to support these efforts (not to lead them). Managers have taken the initiative to make these steps happen.

Traditional peaks and valleys in learning patterns occurred during the workshops. Participants expressing acute frustration and refusing to take part in exercises one week often became skilled at confronting conflict the next. The facilitators spent many hours together after each workshop discussing the "below-the-surface" reactions they saw in body language, side conversations, lack of participation, and overanimation. Some managers needed coaching from the facilitators and higher-level managers in dealing with certain employees.

In general, however, most participants increased their awareness of cultural bias and their commitment to learning and practicing skills to deal with conflict. Major advances in ability to recognize their own biases in diversity conflict situations did not occur in the conflict-resolution exercises, however. Participants with strong basic management skills learned the most. Preassessing

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managers' skill levels and placing them in groups with evenly matched skills would probably have resulted in higher learning levels. More skill practice also may help.

Several managers describe the positive effect their heightened awareness has had on their personal relationships with their children and friends, as well as business associates. They found that the listening skills and openness they practiced to understand values other than their own can apply in any human interaction.

A WORTHWHILE PROGRAM

Mercy Health Services expects better employee relations and more openness to and an increase in the diversity of its work force. By accomplishing this, Mercy leaders expect to be better prepared to meet the needs of diverse patient and customer groups in the community healthcare systems they support.

In retrospect, this was an extremely intense process requiring more thought, time, and energy than any of us had expected. Was it worthwhile? We think so. □

WAYS TO IMPROVE DIVERSITY PROGRAMS' EFFECTIVENESS

- Senior managers should be visible at all programs.

- Educational efforts should include training programs and cultural appreciation activities such as celebrating various holidays, serving a variety of ethnic foods in the cafeteria, displaying the dress of many nations, and arranging informal discussions about a variety of cultures.

- Charts and graphs help employees see the broad overview of the diversity plan.

- Written communication must clearly outline each organization's diversity efforts.

- Organizational leaders must be prepared for negative reactions from employees; a change or transition creates resistance, anger, disengagement, or other reactions typical in the grieving process.

- Diversity plan managers should exchange information with persons in

other organizations in the same stage of diversity plan development or implementation.

- Managers must be adequately prepared to respond to employees' concerns and reactions before the educational efforts target nonmanagers.

- The implementation of a cultural diversity plan is a long-term, continuous effort that will take several years before making substantive organizational inroads. Planners must establish realistic time frames for educational efforts.

- Leaders must decide whether workshops will be mandatory. If they are not, leaders must stress the importance of voluntary attendance.

- To enable participants to hear many points of view, educational programs should include a culturally diverse group. Facilitators should also represent various cultures.

- Strong facilitation and management skills are essential for those lead-

ing the programs so they can respond to employees' reactions.

- Organizational leaders must decide whether the organization is focusing on issues of racism and sexism or on valuing diversity in more general terms. A more general focus may dilute the organization's approach to issues of racism and sexism.

- Sensitizing exercises in workshops take time to be successful. They cannot be accomplished in one-hour department meetings. For videos to be effective, facilitators must discuss them with participants immediately afterward.

- Managers should receive frequent updates related to the total corporate diversity efforts. Organizational leaders must develop ways to support women and minorities, such as mentoring programs.

- Employee relations staff must learn ways to handle racism or sexism issues when they arise.