Leveraging Affinity Groups in Tough Economic Times - By Gloria Johnson Goins

Practical Steps to Demonstrate Value

Perhaps more so than other departments, diversity departments are forever mandated with having to prove their value within their respective organizations. This "value mandate" is applicable to all diversity teams no matter whether they are found inside of a for-profit organization, an academic institution or a non-profit organization. This becomes particularly true in tough economic times.

A month rarely passes when I do not hear from a fellow colleague whose diversity organization has been cut, re-structured or completely eliminated. While the reasons for these changes are as diverse as the organizations involved, one constant reason holds true: in tough economic times, diversity organizations are often causalities of downsizing.

Despite the current turbulent and changing economic times, the fundamental reason why diversity is a business imperative in the global economy has not changed. Namely, the fact remains that the demographics of the United States and the rest of the world are changing and become more diverse. What then explains this disconnect between the unchanged value proposition for diversity and an organization's commitment to this value proposition? The answer rests squarely in the diversity team's ability to connect this value to the organization's overall goals.

In my 11-plus years as a diversity practitioner, I have found that the more adept a diversity practitioner is at both articulating and implementing strategies that are closely aligned to the organization's mission, the more successful he or she will be. This requires that the practitioner have strategies that actually enhance and meet the organization's existing goals – not ones that are misaligned and unrelated. Effectively designed and executed affinity groups are one strategy that can be used to add value to an organization, even in tough economic times. This article shares the

practical tools and steps that I have gleaned from having launched affinity groups at two major Fortune 500 companies. It is designed to assist both potential and existing affinity groups in adding greater value to their organizations.

Affinity Groups 101

An "affinity group" is a group in which employees come together around a single aspect of shared affinity or a diversity dimension, such as gender, age, parental status, military status, race, ethnicity, etc. According to Diversity Best Practices, 90% of Fortune 500 companies have, or will soon have, affinity groups. Affinity groups should exist for one reason alone – to advance an organization's mission. In order to achieve their optimum effectiveness, these groups should not be used as employee gripe groups or social clubs. Below are some areas in which affinity groups can add value:

1) Multicultural Marketing Insights
· Informal focus groups/market research
· Vehicles to identify new products, services and communication strategies

2) Recruitment and Retention
· Informal mentoring and development for employees
· Relationship building with diverse candidates
· Source of employee referrals

3) Community Affairs
· Representation of the organization in diverse communities in relevant and meaningful ways
· Building of strong coalitions with grassroot organizations

4) Culture
· Enhancement of diversity awareness and education among all employees
· Creation of an inclusive and attractive work environment for all employees

10 Critical Success Factors For Effective Affinity Groups

1) A thorough and razor-sharp understanding of all of the organization's existing goals across all departments.
2) Full alignment of each group's mission and objectives with the overall organization's existing goals.
3) Respected senior leaders to serve as the groups' Executive Sponsors, who will provide guidance and advocacy.
4) A business plan that states each group's commitments to help the organization meet its existing goals.
5) A funded budget for each group that is strictly followed.
6) A regular reporting process that documents and measures all the groups' activities. (Reports should be approved by the Executive Sponsors and

shared with key leaders in the business. No key stakeholder should ever wonder what the groups are doing or what value they add.)

7) Opportunities to showcase the work of the groups and recruit new members.

8) Ongoing training coupled with a handbook of guidelines, resources and best practices for members and leaders.

9) Frequent communication of the groups' objectives and accomplishments.

10) Use of technology and social media as a means of both communicating and implementing objectives.

Avoiding the Pitfalls of Affinity Groups

Despite their benefits, some initial resistance or lack of understanding of affinity groups is common, especially in their infancy stages. This is particularly true if an organization is relatively new on its diversity journey. In particular, affinity groups are sometimes labeled as "exclusionary" or "segregated." Some of the ways to minimize these pitfalls are to: 1) continually communicate that the affinity groups are open to any and all employees; 2) launch affinity groups that cover a broad spectrum of diversity (i.e. not just ones focused on race, gender or visible diversity); 3) encourage key leaders and managers within the organization to participate in affinity group activities and invite their peers and teams; and 4) encourage affinity group members to invite other members of their work teams to join them at events to create bridges of understanding.

In summary, affinity groups, when properly structured and managed, can be an effective strategy to demonstrate the value of diversity within the workplace and marketplace. By contrast, when poorly planned and managed, affinity groups can be a recipe for disaster. Organizations that truly want to have effective affinity groups will ensure that they are inextricably tied to clear and existing business goals. Further, organizations will be well-served to carefully plan, monitor and communicate the role of these groups and, above all, ensure that they truly are welcoming and inclusive of *all* people.

For additional information on how to launch effective affinity groups, please contact Gloria Johnson Goins at g_goins@yahoo.com

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