

CREATING A DIVERSE WORKFORCE

By Joseph P. Johnson III, PHR

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The philosophy of an inclusive work environment occurs at the intersection of the right thing to do and a very good business practice. Work groups made up of like-minded people from a common background and a shared educational structure may have an easy time getting along. They typically see the world from a common perspective and solve problems in the same way. Diverse work groups may be conflicted, difficult at first and complex in process, but the outcomes are often quite remarkable. New solutions arise and an effective problem-solving process can result in new and unique approaches.

Any group, regardless of how diverse, can work through many issues if given enough time and communication. Companies should support an environment that encourages diverse work groups committed to the ideal that diversity adds value to the entire organization. This value comes in many forms: new ideas and perspectives, increased motivation and buy-in, increased organizational retention, and mainstreaming new talent, just to name a few. In our complicated world, every possible creative idea is needed; why not promote an environment for ideas in your organization?

What Is Diversity?

There is more to diversity than gender and race differences. There are three major dimensions of diversity: internal, external and organizational. Each dimension has characteristics that help one identify with individuals in different ways. The characteristics that make up each dimension are as follows:

Internal dimension—These characteristics are genetically chosen.

- Age.
- Gender.
- Sexual orientation.
- Physical ability.
- Ethnicity.
- Race.

External dimension—These characteristics influence our lives and our value systems, and contribute to the development of our personalities.

- Geographic location.
- Income.

Personal habits.
Recreational habits.
Religion.
Educational background.
Work experience.
Appearance.
Parental status.
Marital status.

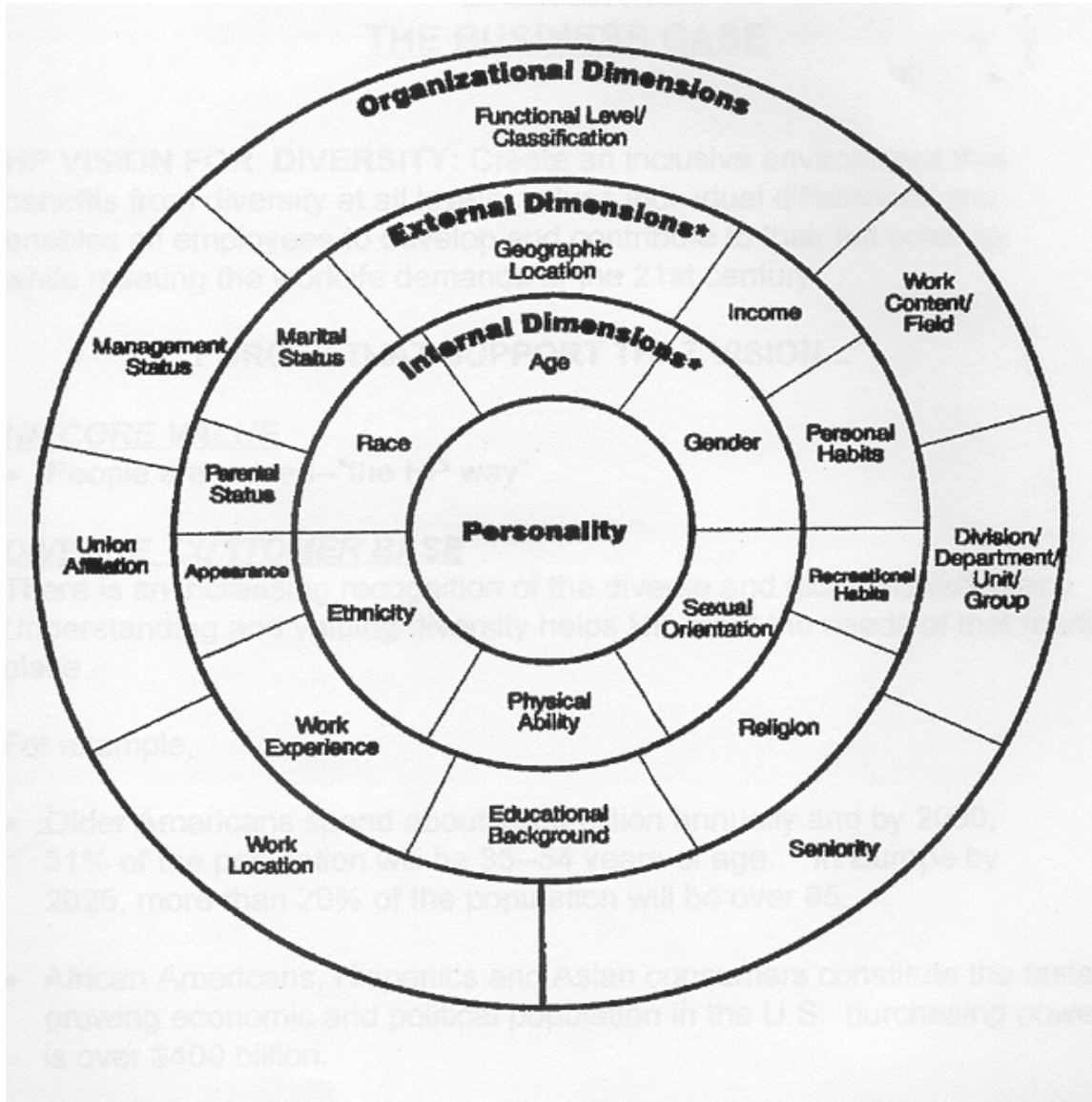
Organizational dimension—These characteristics affect our experiences and work status, and create inferior and superior cultures and attitudes.

- Functional level/classification.
- Work content/field.
- Division/department/unit/group.
- Seniority.
- Work location.
- Union affiliation.
- Management status.

Diversity is not limited to the obvious characteristics of gender and race. Many different traits characterize an individual. The diversity wheel shown below represents those traits in terms of four layers of diversity. Each layer identifies a different dimension that defines who we are. No single element carries more weight than another. The combination of these elements gives each person a unique personality.

The combination of personality and internal, external and organizational dimensions makes people distinctive from each other. As employees get to know others within an organization, they notice what makes each person unique.

The Four Layers of Diversity*



There are endless dimensions of diversity that each individual brings to the work group.

* www.yarbroughgroup.com
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Diversity in Practice

In 1998, Montgomery Watson Harza (MWH), a global environmental engineering and construction company, launched a diversity initiative. The initiative's goal seeks to create a more effective and harmonious workplace through the improvement of individual awareness and group effectiveness.

MWH has identified internal diversity champions to facilitate quarterly diversity sessions at the divisional level. The champions are identified and selected by senior management to participate in organizational discussion groups. The goal of these groups is the continued pursuit of understanding and valuing individual differences and similarities. Valuing individual diversity means reaching beyond stereotypical views and using the strengths and different perspectives that each person offers because of his or her unique background. Even more important, the organization embraces and derives value from the diverse views that each individual brings.

MWH developed and implemented the following process to aid in the creation of an inclusive work environment based on its "Vision of Diversity": To create a working environment where all differences are valued and all employees are a part of high-performing, productive teams delivering exceptional service to our clients and to ourselves.

The former CEO of MWH initiated the diversity program. He and his senior leadership team members were the first to participate in the company diversity sessions, which have been held annually for the past four years. The CEO conveyed to the senior leadership team the idea that success would mean embracing diversity and all of its dimensions in order to foster new ideas for the ultimate goal of becoming the leading environmental engineering and construction firm.

MWH senior leadership appointed a diversity council advisory board made up of employees of various ethnicities, genders, ages and experience backgrounds. The respective MWH group managers and business unit leaders nominated the individuals selected for the council. These individuals have demonstrated a passion for improving diversity to ultimately create an inclusive environment by serving in an advisory capacity to MWH's senior leadership.

MWH produces a quarterly newsletter, which features diverse individuals making strides in the organization as well as in their local communities. The funds to facilitate these activities generally come from two sources: the diversity council budget and the respective area business unit.

The company's internal, corporate university, Montgomery Watson Harza University (MWHU), supports the diversity initiative. Courses offered include "Women and Men Working Together," "Women's Leadership Seminar" and "Multicultural Diversity." These three classes comprise 30 percent of the classes offered through MWHU. Over 400 of MWH's employees have completed diversity courses since 1999. These classes are an organizational measurement of the company's goal of moving toward a more inclusive work environment.

In keeping with the practices of many premier companies, MWH enlisted the senior leadership team to create a balanced scorecard. The scorecard was created to support the accountability and the overall effectiveness of the MWH organization. Under the talent category of the balanced scorecard, one of the main initiatives is to improve diversity throughout the company. Improving diversity can be measured through increased diversity course attendance and awareness, number of diverse hires throughout the company, and increased number of diverse candidates achieving the vice president level. MWH senior leadership supports those employees who carry the diversity torch. Senior leadership encourages all employees to share in the responsibility for creating an inclusive work environment.

MWH makes it a point to share literature about current organizational diversity events via an internal knowledge base network called KNet. KNet creates an electronic portal to help employees find information throughout the company. Employees use KNet to educate themselves through online programs as well as networking with other employees throughout the company to share ideas. MWH encourages many activities that will have the effect of stimulating thought and growth. For example, the women's leadership group, which is spearheaded by five of MWH's women leaders, networks through KNet to bring other women together within the company to provide support and mentoring. In addition, MWH's Salt Lake City office has a women's leadership group, which created a scholarship fund to help develop young women in its community.

The company promotes the hiring of diverse staff through the college relations program. This program identifies top colleges and recruiting events that promote diversity awareness. MWH seeks qualified candidates who believe in its efforts to improve diversity. MWH also frequently posts job openings with national organizations such as the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE), the Society of Hispanic Engineers (SHPE) and the Society of Women Engineers (SWE) to ensure a diverse mixture of resumes. In addition, MWH attends ethnically diverse trade shows and national conventions attended by candidates from various cultural backgrounds.

MWH established an online orientation tool, which provides a perfect way to communicate the diversity message. Some examples of orientation topics include benefits information, where do I fit in the MWH, diversity and company values. One of the major points of this online orientation is to establish the company's commitment to diversity.

MWH embraces diversity by hosting two employee gatherings, one in the winter and one in the summer, where employees are invited to bring their family and friends to share and network with others. The inclusion of families in company wide events shows dedication to the life of the whole person, not just the employee at work.

The creation of a diverse workforce adds value to any organization. Diversity brings fresh perspectives, as well as new solutions, to solve global organizational problems. Diversity awareness and appreciation require time and countless daily acts to

maintain the ultimate goal of an inclusive work environment. Chief executive officers, presidents and leaders of organizations have a responsibility to create “bridges of change.” If this were an easy process, it would be visible in every organization. Those already on the bridge are bringing others into the power culture. Those who believe the bridge is not complete must work to build it.

SHRM wishes to thank Joseph P. Johnson III for contributing this article. It is intended to provide general information and is not a substitute for legal or other professional advice.

Joseph P. Johnson III is a human resources generalist for MWH Americas. He has co-facilitated diversity sessions under the direction of MWHU and has participated in several diversity sessions for the organization.