



**DIVERSITY COUNCILS  
THAT WORK**

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**A WORKBOOK  
FOR SUCCESS**

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## II. What Diversity Councils Are — and Are Not

### *A Working Definition*

A successful diversity council is an internal body (often using external help) composed of carefully chosen members who represent a cross-section of the enterprise. The council drives the organization's diversity efforts based on a clear charter and operating with the full, visible support of the senior executive officers.

### *An internal body...*

Understanding the scope of human talent and needs must come from within the organization. Each enterprise will find a different set of diversity issues. For some, the biggest ones may be age and religion; for others, geographic location and job function. Many organizations continue to see race, gender and sexual orientation as their "hot" buttons. Whatever the issues, diversity councils offer a unique way to guide and monitor the organization's efforts in respecting and harnessing the power of differences among people. It's a task that no outsider can do.

### *... (often using external help) ...*

Sometimes, guiding the organization through a major change cannot be accomplished solely from the inside. External help brings the knowledge of best practices from the field to your specific situation and eliminates the need for internal people to waste time reinventing the wheel. An internal group that avails itself of wise consultation takes advantage of the best of both worlds.

Outside consultants are effective in the early stages of shaping diversity councils because they bring:

- ◆ An objective perspective,
- ◆ Training experience,
- ◆ Knowledge of best practices, and
- ◆ A commitment to confidentiality.

The diversity council may be enlisted to help the organization select a consultant.

Look for consultants who

- ◆ **Demonstrate a proven success record working with diversity councils,**
- ◆ **Have dealt with a wide range of organizations in terms of diversity initiatives,**
- ◆ **Are committed to helping their clients develop their own skills, gradually lessening their dependence on the consultants, and**
- ◆ **Acknowledge and use the internal expertise of council members.**



**Your Turn**

*Advantages of consultants for our council include:*

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*Disadvantages of consultants:*

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**Toolbox 1:**

**Be wary of consultants who**

- Offer solutions before developing an intimate knowledge of your organization;
- Disregard confidentiality agreements;
- Divulge sensitive information about other clients; and
- Define diversity too narrowly.

**... composed of carefully chosen members**

Membership issues on the diversity council pose a host of questions:

- ◆ Should these members be elected, selected, self-selected?
- ◆ How broadly should the organization look to obtain members?
- ◆ What's the balance of minority /majority members?
- ◆ Should it represent the whole population?
- ◆ Should the council be centralized or decentralized?
- ◆ Does it include white males (or other majority group), too?
- ◆ Does it include only senior management?
- ◆ Are classified as well as unclassified employees represented?
- ◆ How should the unions be involved?

Selection of the members of the council should be based on a wide view of diversity. The council should be as diverse as possible, taking into consideration an expanded view of diversity that encompasses religion, parental status, age, race, gender, sexual orientation, geographic location, union membership, and job classification, among other characteristics. It should also include white men (or other majority group members).

One of the most dynamic diversity councils we have seen is a group that has energized the larger organization's thrust for valuing diversity. Part of their secret to success may have been the process by which members were selected for membership. (See Toolbox 2.)



**Toolbox 2:**  
**A Selection Model**

*One company accepted 175 nominations for the diversity leadership team from officers, department heads, and union leaders. One hundred and twenty-seven of those nominees indicated they wanted to be on the team. Of that number, 64 completed applications and were then interviewed by a task force whose main objective was to identify those people who envisioned diversity as including more than race and gender. Finally, 40 people were asked and agreed to become charter members of the diversity council.*

***Selection Approaches***

Credibility is the characteristic most needed by members of the diversity council. Look for employees who are highly regarded by their peers. These people do not have their own agendas for joining the committee; e.g., they are not going to use the council as a stepping stone for a promotion.

Steer clear of ideologues and people who may be extremely articulate but don't listen to anyone else.

Look for diversity in personality style as well as in other factors. Try for a mix of leadership and temperament styles. Avoid those employees who have an ax to grind or a personal vendetta against someone or some group of people.

Seek a mix of managers and non-managers. One member of a health care diversity council wondered whether his group was too top-heavy. "I'm concerned that we have too many managers and not enough of the regular folks," he said. His comment produced swift reactions from the three managers on the committee. They didn't want to lose their spot. Upon further discussion, it became more apparent that the team really thrived with a mix of managers and non-managers. If either had been without a voice, the team would have lost its credibility with other managers as well as some of its important diversity in perspective.

Look for a mix of "minority" people, as well. Don't be persuaded to overload the committee with people of color, for instance, or women, or representatives of whatever other "minority" groups are present in the organization. Doing so will give rise to the inaccurate perception that diversity is only an issue for minorities.

