

Management: The Five Biggest Traps to Avoid When Leading a Diverse Team

by Joanne G. Sujansky, Ph.D., CSP , *Occupational Hazards*, August, 2004, pg 23.

<http://www.occupationalhazards.com/articles/12210>

Are you dealing with an increasingly diverse work force or EHS team in your organization? If so, being aware of these traps could help to dramatically improve your safety and health efforts.

Today's leader must motivate and retain talent, that talent being perhaps the most diverse it's ever been. The differences are of many kinds, including, but not limited to: race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual preference, lifestyle, physical and mental challenges, geographic origin, education, personality, values, experience and socio-economic status.

There are five common traps that leaders fall into when leading diverse teams, as shown below. Also included are some suggestions for avoiding these mistakes:

1. Not Valuing Differences

When leaders see differences as an advantage, they seek diversity in their teams and work hard to get different perspectives and opinions on the table. They naturally encourage individuality while promoting teamwork. This means they actively encourage team members to share ideas and to suggest options that have not already been considered.

2. Failure to Create an Inclusive Environment

Leaders need to encourage the involvement of all team members who, in turn, need to feel comfortable about offering suggestions and challenging ideas or practices. Leaders demonstrate inclusion by being open to new ideas, listening to different perspectives and encouraging creative problem solving. An inclusive leader will challenge the group with comments like, "What other ways can we spin this idea?" "Who can suggest something totally radical to what we've done in the past?" A leader may also encourage participation by asking individuals to list ideas on cards to be submitted to a master brainstorm list.

3. Stereotyping

Leaders must avoid associating any behaviors, talents or lack of ability with any particular group. For instance, any leader who assumes that all women are emotional or that all Asians are excellent in math is guilty of prejudice and, further, does not acknowledge the uniqueness of each individual.

4. Not Modeling the Expected Behaviors

Effective leaders demonstrate the behaviors they want from others. When they show respect for differences, develop trust in their teams and promote the valuing of differences, they set the standard for how others should behave. They should clearly communicate that disrespect for others will not be tolerated. If they observe inappropriate actions or hear disparaging comments, leaders need to be quick to confront the behavior and to suggest or encourage more appropriate ways to handle the situation.

5. Failure to Coach

Leaders need to make expectations clear to all employees and coach them individually toward higher levels of performance and growth. Besides the individual coaching, leaders will need to help diverse teams with conflicts that may arise from their differences. The leader must also encourage team members to coach others. As coaching becomes part of the environment, new members to the team have access to and can build mentor relationships with others who can be helpful resources in the organization.

Talented individuals bring different perspectives and ideas to the workplace. It's a leader's job to attract and retain them. Avoiding these five traps can move diverse teams to their highest level of performance.

Joanne G. Sujansky, Ph.D., CSP (Certified Speaking Professional) is the founder of KEYGroup, an international assessment and training firm. She is a frequently featured speaker and has authored numerous books on leadership, change and retention. Reach her at: (724) 942-7900 or at www.joannesujansky.com.