

“Going Beyond Diversity Training”

by Ted Santos

**“If you can find a path with no obstacles, it probably doesn’t lead anywhere.”
—Frank A. Clark**

Shifting the Focus

The corporate environment is ripe for women and minorities to step into leadership roles. To maintain those roles, it will be important to develop skills to handle larger obstacles. When you aspire for higher accountability, you must be prepared for unfamiliar obstacles and constant changes.

While including women and minorities in senior management teams is important, global competition demands top talent. Therefore, diversity alone is not enough. Cultivating top talent, regardless of cultural background, is an effective means for success when companies seek to differentiate themselves.

If you, as a manager, are going to build high performing teams, you and your people will need constant growth and loftier career aspirations. However, you will have to become accustomed to operating outside of your comfort zone. To do so, you will be required to consistently increase your skills and competencies. And who is responsible for your professional development?

As companies continue to provide training on a regular basis, preparation for management positions, especially senior management, is left to the individual. If you are committed to securing a job with high accountability, you must be responsible for training and developing yourself. This may seem counterintuitive at first. Yet, when you look at professional athletics, the top performers always work with someone who can advise or coach them to the next level. The athlete is responsible for creating those training structures and hiring the appropriate coaches.

In business, there is no difference. There is, however, a common expectation that your employer is responsible for your professional development and to some extent that is true. However, corporate training may not be able to fulfill your unique training needs. For example, functioning within senior management requires you to have a greater comfort level with taking risks. To do so, you may have to get beyond many personal issues and create a new mindset for yourself. Your company may not have the training programs to accommodate you.

In fact, after extensive interviews within Fortune 100 companies, we found a major complaint was that people forgot most of what they learned in corporate training classrooms; much of the learning was static and not relevant to what they encountered day-to-day.

Preparing for leadership

Many managers we interviewed requested training and development (coaching) in real-time. This medium better prepared them for the challenges of managing a dynamic environment as well as handling the complexities of a diverse team or department. Therefore, seeking such training structures outside of your place of employment would

be in your best interest.

Without extensive leadership training, management's primary function, producing results through others, can be frustrating at best, especially when leading a team that has organized itself into silos. When managing silos or a diverse population of staff and managers, leaders must create a platform on which the entire team can stand. By doing so, there is less emphasis on the differences between the people on the team and a greater focus on what all members of the team are committed to achieving together. Once a common platform has been created, diverse groups of people will see how in reality, they all share similar values, ambitions and needs.

Leading diversity

When a team shares the same values and vision, they gel better as a group. However, with diverse thinkers, religions and so on, there must be effective management tools to keep people aligned. Below is a brief outline of four strategies to lead diverse teams and disperse silos. Additionally, these are important competencies for women and minorities to acquire before they take on the challenges of a leadership role.

1. Create a new mindset.

Outdated mindsets create outdated conversations. Outdated conversations can inaccurately predetermine what's possible as well as what's impossible. Part of the job of leadership is to engage people in new conversations for what's possible. In those conversations, people have a chance to identify untapped opportunities. In some cases, untapped opportunities can appear risky.

In the book "Risk Intelligence," David Apagar says that "the biggest problem people have when faced with risk is that they know too much... [about] themselves." People tend to see themselves with presupposed limits and capabilities based on their knowledge and experience. A change in leadership mindset will support a change in staff and managerial mindsets.

One important conversation for leadership, as well as staff and management is: For what kind of company do I want to work? And in what ways will I be responsible for making sure it happens? From this perspective, everyone is responsible for the success of the enterprise.

2. Create a problem.

This requires a different perspective when viewing problems and may appear counterintuitive. Yet, to create a platform on which people can stand together, leadership must create a problem for staff and management to solve. This is not to say leadership is looking for problems to solve. Instead, leadership must galvanize the entire organization or team around the invention of a new product, service or innovative productivity process. Because the project has never been done before and there is no blue print, it can appear as a problem.

Creating problems is a powerful strategy for bringing purpose to teams. Everyone is focused on solving the problem. When people have a problem to solve, it breaks down barriers and dissolves silos. If the problem is larger than one person's knowledge and experience, the skills and competencies of colleagues, suppliers and clients will be leveraged. It is a way to create disruptive technology and move the enterprise beyond existing skills, competencies and know-how.

3. Create a common language.

In addition to enhanced skills and competencies, a common language must be created to unify people. John Seely Brown, former Chief Scientist of Xerox said, "...e-learning platform also fosters a shared vocabulary, set of methodologies and perspectives regarding technology architectures and evolution. This helps to set the stage for deepening trust and enhancing the ability to collaborate effectively. As a result, it also helps to increase the potential for business innovation." Common language also synthesizes disparate teams and thought processes. Everyone's efforts on common goals and objectives are concentrated when new language is created.

4. Allow people to fail.

With new language and a problem to solve, an environment for accomplishment is fostered. Even though people will begin to galvanize themselves into action, they need to know that it is permissible to take actions outside of the box. Those new and seemingly irrational actions will require practice. In the beginning it will look like failure. However, yesterday's failures become tomorrow's breakthroughs.

When organizations continuously innovate, staff and management will have to become comfortable with greater accountability and responsibility. For that reason, there may be a greater return on investment from training people in intrapersonal skills first — a clear understanding of the relationship with self, chaos, opportunity, the future, change, risk, and colleagues — instead of teaching people to understand the differences between themselves and others.

¹ From Push to Pull—Emerging Models for Mobilizing Resources by John Hagel & John Seely Brown, page 12. Working Paper, October 2005