The 21st Century Workplace: Why Obeying Human Rights Laws Isn't Enough to Achieve Diversity



HR people spend a lot of time talking about "diversity" and "discrimination" (or "non-discrimination"). While both are crucial values, they're not the same thing. And if you use the terms interchangeably, chances are that you're not doing enough to help your organization achieve both goals.

What Diversity Is All About

Organizations are a collection of individuals whose unique characteristics and experiences shape the way they perceive the world, process information and make decisions. Within the HR context, the term "diversity" refers not just to the existence of personal differences but the value of harnessing them as a source of organizational strength.

The Diversity Continuum

Diversity as a value is actually a continuum of positive attitudes toward personal differences:

- Toleration in which people must be restrained from letting personal differences to become a source of discord, conflict and discrimination;
- Acceptance in which decency, respect and fairness for all comes more naturally; and
- Inclusion in which personal differences are embraced and leveraged to improve business performance.

The Discrimination Laws

Of course, diversity isn't just an ethical but a legal obligation. Human rights laws ban discrimination and require employers to equal opportunity regardless of race, sex, religion, disability and other personal characteristics protected by the law.

While imperative, obeying human rights laws gets you only to the tolerance range of the diversity continuum. The law doesn't force you to like or even accept personal differences as long as the ground rules you use for deciding who to hire, promote and other employment decisions are reasonable, based on merit and fairly applied. Moreover, protection from discrimination is limited to a handful of personal

characteristics, including age, race, religion, nationality, sex, disability, family status, sexual preference, gender identity, income source, political belief, criminal background, etc.

The Quest for Inclusion

To achieve diversity, organizations must go beyond simple compliance and strive for the farther ranges of the continuum. Acceptance and inclusion are based not simply on policies and procedures but attitudes toward differences as well as recognition of how those differences can be leveraged as a competitive advantage empowering to:

- Attract and retain the best people;
- Maximize productivity;
- Provide better services and products to r customers;
- Better serve the community; and
- Enhance the organization’s reputation

In addition, inclusion encompasses not just the personal characteristics protected by human rights but any personal differences that may affect how individuals perceive and are perceived by the world, including: differences in:

- Educational background;
- Work roles;
- Style of communication;
- Job skills;
- Organizational levels;
- Personal interests outside of work;
- Values; and
- Social styles.