

Diversity in the Workplace: Search for Similarities

Diverse People: Just Like Me?

By Susan M. Heathfield, About.com

Want to develop effective working relationships with diverse people at work? Start with similarities, not differences, among people when you build relationships. Diversity in the workplace adds a special richness, but also special challenges. In a professional environment diverse work relationships are critical for your success.

We've emphasized honoring and appreciating the diverse needs, skills, talents, and contributions of people in recent years. While this is critical, don't let the pendulum swing too far in this direction. We are in danger of forgetting to honor and appreciate our similarities. By acknowledging the similarities and likenesses, we create a starting point for understanding and appreciating diversity in the work place.

A strong example emerges in *The Human Capital Edge: 21 People Management Practices Your Company Must Implement (or Avoid) to Maximize Shareholder Value* by Bruce N. Pfau and Ira T. Kay, executives with Watson Wyatt Worldwide. In Watson Wyatt's WorkUSA research, they asked 7500 workers at all job levels across diverse industries to respond to 130 statements about their workplaces. Watson Wyatt broke down the responses to look for diversity patterns across demographics including whites versus minorities, men versus women, and people over and under 30 years old.

They found more similarities than differences, especially in the categories respondents rated as most important to them. People agreed about what inspires their commitment to a particular employer. People cited the following factors as important.

- They supported their company's business plan,
- They had a chance to use their skills on the job,
- Their reward package was competitive, and
- The company acted on employee suggestions.

People also agreed on what organizations need to improve: employee input and promoting the best performers while helping the worst performers get better. Additionally, the employees want to know how their job affects internal and external customers. They want to understand how their job contributes to the accomplishment of company business goals. They want a safe work environment and highly rated products and services.

Recommendations for Diverse Workplace Success

In response to the research, Pfau and Key recommend that organizations concentrate on four areas with their employees.

- Keep your company effective, winning, and on the right track.
- Help people, supplied with needed resources, use their talents and skills to contribute to the overall accomplishment of organization objectives.
- Respect and value people and recognize and act on their contributions.
- Create an environment in which people have interesting work and enjoy their coworkers.

On the Interpersonal Level

Take a look at your coworkers or reporting staff with new eyes. Think about the factors that you share in common with them. You'll find:

- You're all human beings with complex emotions, needs, interests, outlooks, viewpoints and dreams. Share something about yourself to create an environment in which your coworker wants to share information with you. Listen and don't pry. Polite and continuing interest in your coworkers contributes to workplace harmony.
- You have family and other interests outside of work. Hear what your coworkers tell you about their personal lives. Remember the highlights to demonstrate respect and interest.
- You have similar needs from work as demonstrated above in *The Human Capital Edge*. Acknowledge this and note the commonalities.

Work is more exciting when you feel as if you are accomplishing mutual goals. Act as if you are part of a winning team. Emphasize, with coworkers, your common interest in your success and the success of the organization. You'll get to know people as people if you participate in any fun or team building events your organization sponsors. Better yet, join the team that plans them.

Conclusions About Diversity and Similarity

If you start by recognizing the ways in which you are similar to your coworkers, you'll build a base of understanding and acceptance that will withstand the sometimes stormy times when your differences come to the forefront.