

Study discerns elements of successful diversity training

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Jamie L. Perry. Credit: Cornell University

New research from Cornell's School of Hotel Administration (SHA), which evaluated a variety of diversity training programs offered by business organizations and institutions, sheds some light on developing training that has a significant impact in addressing stereotyping and other

biases in work environments.

The study, "Diversity Training, A Meta-Analytical Integration of over 40 Years of Research on Diversity Training Evaluation," shows the best results are achieved when training is complemented by other [diversity initiatives](#) and continues over time. Jamie L. Perry, an assistant professor at SHA, is among the authors of the report.

The most effective types of [diversity training](#) programs had two things in common. Firstly, "They were primarily designed to increase both diversity awareness and skills," Perry said. Secondly, "They employ many different instructional methods, such as lectures, exercises, group activities and discussions, all together," she said.

"We also found that diversity training was most effective when training was integrated or embedded in a comprehensive diversity curriculum, instead of just offering one class or seminar, as it signaled managerial commitment to diversity," Perry said.

Researchers evaluated 260 independent programs, focusing on training context, design and participants. Models from training literature and psychological theory on diversity were used to compile the findings.

"Psychological theory informs our understanding of diversity training by explaining the effect diversity has on one's personal attitudes and beliefs," said Perry. "For example, we draw from contact hypothesis to suggest that not only does frequent contact with people who are different from us facilitate a change in attitudes and beliefs, but also frequent contact that is espoused by management further increases the effectiveness of diversity training programs."

Diversity training has the most lasting and stable impact on a trainee's declarative knowledge about cultural-diversity issues, such as awareness

of different cultural perspectives, health needs of ethnic minorities and stereotypes. But the impact on skill development and attitudes toward diversity decayed over time.

Institutional support makes a difference. Contact and interaction with a diverse group of people within an organization should be encouraged by those in positions of power. Integrated training is more effective than training that focuses only on more narrow perspectives, such as legal and compliance issues or cultural differences.

Mandatory training is preferable as it sends a message the organization is committed to diversity, boosting the trainees' motivation to learn.

The authors suggest their results can inform public and private policy connected to diversity training, which focuses on unresolved social problems such as race and gender relations. Such training can serve as a response to these societal challenges, as well as to local incidents in schools, workplaces and communities.

"Diversity training can work as an 'on-the-ground' approach by providing tools, information and knowledge to help employees not only understand societal issues but also apply them to day-to-day interactions with those of different races, religions and ethnic groups," Perry said.

This study will be published in *Psychological Bulletin*.

Provided by Cornell University

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