Study of diversity training suggests it doesn't lead to much change

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A team of researchers from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School has found through experimentation that diversity training does not generally result in much change in work environments—though it might lead women and minorities to strengthen mentoring programs. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the group describes their study, which involved giving a training program to 3,016 employees in 63 countries and the impact it

had on them.

Diversity training has been in the news a lot lately—though it is not clear how well it works. At its core, diversity training involves classes meant to teach employees the rules involved in treatment of people that are different from them—how to not be racist or how to not treat women as second-class citizens, for example. In this new effort, the researchers sought to determine if diversity training actually results in changes in the workplace.

The researchers designed their own diversity training program and sent it out to willing organizations —in all, they got 3,016 employees to volunteer for the training in 63 countries. The training was focused on highlighting stereotypes and how they can lead to certain behaviors, and ways employees could overcome biases. The researchers then followed up by measuring changes that resulted due to the training.

The researchers found little evidence of behavior change in any of the organizations where employees had taken the diversity training program. In the program geared toward reducing biases against women, the researchers found that employees were willing to admit such biases, they just were not willing to do anything about them. They also found employees not in the U.S. described themselves as more supportive of women after the training. In the U.S., the only change was that female employees expressed more willingness to mentor other women.

In the part of the study focusing on racial bias, the researchers found that employees were willing to admit having racial biases, but no measurable changes in behavior were seen during follow-up. They also found that disadvantaged employees were more willing to mentor others.

The researchers conclude by suggesting that organizations need to partner with research organizations to find ways to improve diversity

[training](#) and to actively follow up to see if it does any good.

More information: Edward H. Chang et al. The mixed effects of online diversity training, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2019). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1816076116](#)

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