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Challenging diversity training myths: Changing the conversation about diversity training to shape science and practice

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CHALLENGING DIVERSITY TRAINING MYTHS: HOW CHANGING THE CONVERSATION ABOUT DIVERSITY TRAINING CAN SHAPE SCIENCE AND PRACTICE

Few time periods in the past five decades match the intensity of social conflict that Americans have witnessed during the 2016 presidential campaign, election, and administration. Polarized attitudes around immigration, visible sexual harassment charges, the Black Lives Matter movement, and White Nationalist protests have dominated the media and our lives. Furthermore, these powerful social dynamics also infect the places where we work and intensify strain on workplace issues that touch upon or involve intergroup differences (e.g., race, gender).

One of the most common organizational responses to these dynamics is diversity training. While practitioners and researchers alike have studied diversity training, previous examinations have not sufficiently articulated and empirically addressed misconceptions or captured the nuances of and effective interventions. As a result, there remains an incomplete and disconnected understanding of diversity training. In this review, we identify commonly-held beliefs about diversity training in the form of overarching myths.

There are several advantages to a myth-centered review of the literature. First, this unique approach allows us to engage with perspectives beyond those detected in the limited scope of published studies. In beginning with the public discourse about diversity training, rather than a limited set of empirical studies, we apply a broader, more integrative, and more ecologically sound lens. Second, this

approach allows us to directly identify and address barriers to training effectiveness. Pre-training beliefs, including those that can be labeled “myths,” influence the effectiveness of training and thus can represent meaningful barriers to its effectiveness. Third, our approach enables us to review common misinterpretations of existing literature on diversity training. Because individual studies are inherently constrained by methodological decisions and limitations that leave them open to inappropriate interpretations, a focus on emergent myths allows us to challenge unfounded critiques and conclusions. Fourth and finally, a myth-centered review allows us to clarify contradictions in diversity training recommendations that existing reviews do not address.

This “myth” approach can be contrasted with existing meta-analytic and narrative reviews of the diversity training literature that are limited by existing data. Diversity training research is difficult to do; researchers face limited access due to liability concerns, few validated behavioral measures, and little room for rigorous experimental methodology that includes random assignment and variable manipulations. Perhaps because of these limitations, not a single paper on the topic of diversity training has ever been published in the *Academy of Management Journal*. This review, by extending beyond those studies that have survived the peer-review process, is inclusive of perspectives beyond the Ivory Tower.

In addition, a focus on myths inverts the questions that scholars and practitioners ask. Instead of asking, “How do we design diversity training so that it is effective?,” we ask, “What is getting in the way of effective diversity training?” That is, instead of addressing narrow sets of theoretically-driven variables that are typically examined in carefully

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2018.09.001>

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designed research studies, we build from commonly-held beliefs to establish what variables we should be studying in the first place. In so doing, we confront the practical barriers to diversity training effectiveness and provide new insights into training and prejudice reduction theories.

Finally, through the comprehensive identification and analysis of misconceptions about diversity training, we aim to create a more unified understanding of training effectiveness. The current diversity training literature is fraught with scattered evidence and siloed investigations, resulting in many contradictions and conflicting advice. While a birds'-eye view of the diversity training landscape suggests that it is a valuable tool, many inconsistencies and mysteries remain. Indeed, a growing body of evidence has been collected to evaluate the efficacy of such programs. On one hand, some evidence seems to suggest that diversity training can be linked to important organizational outcomes. Such training has been linked to increased employee retention, better intergroup interactions, awareness of cultural bias, reduction of workplace harassment, and increased fairness and equality in the workplace.

On the other hand, some evidence suggests diversity training is ineffective at best and destructive at worst. To this point, Frank Dobbin and his colleagues examined EEO and HR data and found a correlation between a range of diversity efforts and change in manager representation. They suggested reasons why diversity programs fail. First, they suggest that the training rarely implemented beyond a day and that it often activates backlash. Second, they suggest that the messages involved in diversity training can be negative, adverse, or otherwise threatening (e.g., "do this or else"). Third, they suggest that mandatory training makes people angry. Finally, employees often feel that such training is done as a punishment. While we agree with some of these conclusions, we believe diversity training has great potential to be effective. Certainly questions do exist about how to maximize the utility and effectiveness of diversity training. By closely examining myths, addressing them with interdisciplinary research, and synthesizing findings, this review will thus integrate diversity training wisdoms.

To this end, we identify and challenge diversity myths. We first extracted 19 myths and misconceptions through dual-pronged mechanisms: directly, from major online agencies proclaiming to address such myths, and indirectly, through reviews of popular news outlets, which claim "Diversity Training Doesn't Work," explain "Why Your Unconscious Bias Training Isn't Working," and question "Why Doesn't Diversity Training Work?" We organize these myths thematically around the key components of the science of training including content, design and delivery, and evaluation. Finally, we addressed each of these myths through targeted, empirically-based research, offering much-needed clarifications and best practices. Perhaps one of the clearest conclusions that we can make is that most interventions are not grounded in theory or backed by empirical support; hence, we cannot fully understand impact of diversity training. As a whole, the field must move towards sounder, more science-based applications of diversity training, which first begins with the dispelling of myths. Accordingly, we provide research-based counterarguments for each of the identified misconceptions. We begin by discussing the myths that

directly relate to the question of diversity training effectiveness and evaluation, before describing the narrower myths related to the content, design, and delivery of training (see Table 1).

MYTHS ABOUT EFFECTIVENESS AND EVALUATION

Diversity Training Does Not Work

Attention-grabbing headlines like Dobbin's Harvard Business Review piece "Why Diversity Programs Fail" reflect an inaccurate perspective of diversity training. Such sweeping generalizations discourage a necessary, nuanced understanding of diversity training and perpetuate a potentially-destructive myth: that diversity training simply does not work. The truth is that any assertion that diversity training does or does not "work" is false. The question must shift from whether or not diversity "works" to more careful considerations of for whom, how, when, where, and in what way (or to what end) does each training work. For example, a recent meta-analysis demonstrates that diversity trainings can be effective when they target awareness and skills over a prolonged period of time (Bezrukova, K., Spell, C. S., Perry, J. L., & Jehn, K. A. (2016). A meta-analytical integration of over 40 years of research on diversity training evaluation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 142(11), 1227.). Unfortunately, organizations do not typically explore these core questions adequately, resulting in problematic conclusions and interpretations downstream. It is no surprise, then, that confusion abounds around the conditions that give rise to effective diversity training. This confusion is perpetuated by myths about potentially irrelevant consequences.

There is Always Backlash with Diversity Training

Organizations may hesitate to implement diversity training because of the perception that it may result in backlash from employees. Backlash is a strong and negative reaction, often by a significant number of people, to an attempt at some political or social situation that is gaining prominence. A number of researchers have discussed and found evidence for backlash, particularly when it overemphasizes a "blame and shame" approach and/or enhances (rather than decreases) stereotypes about group members.

Despite this, the majority of evidence from primary and meta-analytic studies concludes that diversity training can have many positive effects on affective, cognitive, and skill outcomes. For example, diversity trainings can improve employee attitudes, knowledge, and on-the-job behaviors. In their meta-analysis, Bezrukova and colleagues (2016) found that the overall effect size for diversity training on these outcomes was .38 and that diversity training had the largest positive impact on reactions ($g = .61$). As backlash is, in itself, a reaction to diversity training, this finding directly contradicts the notion that diversity training always elicits backlash. While diversity training may carry potential for backlash, organizations have ample opportunity to design programs that avoid backlash and improve learning outcomes for trainees. Bezrukova and colleagues (2016) noted several moderators impacting trainee reactions, including a

Table 1 Diversity Training Myths

Category		
Myth	Reality	Recommendation
Effectiveness and evaluation		
Diversity training does not work.	Diversity training can be effective when designed and implemented appropriately.	Organizations must design trainings to be maximally effective, integrating best practices in training science.
There is always backlash with diversity training.	Although backlash is a possibility, Bezrukova’s meta-analysis suggests that reactions to diversity training are typically positive.	Addressing moderators such as trainee group characteristics and a variety of instructional approaches can further ensure that backlash to diversity training is minimized.
Diversity training always does more good than harm.	While diversity trainings on average have positive outcomes, they also have a number of potential negative outcomes, such as backlash from participants, increased conflict, or a false sense of fairness in the organization.	Organizations and diversity trainers should be aware of potential negative outcomes and what impacts these outcomes. They should follow research-based strategies to minimize backlash and conflict, and keep in mind that diversity trainings are not a cure-all for prejudice and discrimination.
If people did not like the diversity training, it did not work.	Organizations are overly reliant on trainee satisfaction as a measure of success; however, training success should be evaluated using a diverse nomological network.	The efficacy of diversity training should be evaluated over time and on dimensions apart from trainee satisfaction, such as learning and behavioral outcomes.
The diversity training return on investment (ROI) is unfavorable.	Valuable outcomes of diversity training can include employee attraction, retention, and engagement.	In addition to the moral justifications, diversity training can also be justified in reference to ROI.
Content		
Diversity is just common sense.	People have biases, both explicit and implicit and many of us are unaware of our own biases.	Implementing diversity training can help increase awareness of biases, and subsequently reduce them.
Diversity training is only about championing the rights of minority and underrepresented groups.	Although greater opportunity for minority groups is indeed a potential benefit of diversity training, it is but one of a multitude of outcomes. Other positive effects of diversity training include those related to business, learning, and social justice.	Organizations should describe the empirically-demonstrated benefits of diversity that include and extend beyond championing the rights of minority groups, such as competitive advantage, increased self-knowledge, and fairer decision-making.
Diversity training is only about “doing the right thing.”	Organizations can reap benefits from diversity training including improved organizational reputation, improved organizational performance, and avoiding negative legal ramifications of perceived discrimination.	Organizations should engage in diversity training for competitive advantages, in addition to “doing the right thing.”
One can take a singular approach to training, regardless of diversity issues.	“One-size-fits-all” approaches do a disservice to diversity initiatives, often creating disingenuous atmospheres and obfuscating organizational goals. The training literature has thus underscored the importance of the needs analysis, in which data is systematically gathered to determine training goals.	Trainings must be tailored to organizations to maximize effectiveness, and training needs analyses should be conducted to determine program needs and goals.
Diversity is just about race and gender.	Diversity includes surface-level differences, such as racial and gender diversity, as well as deep-level differences, such as diversity in attitudes, values, and beliefs.	Although any characterization of diversity should certainly involve race and gender, these are by no means the only types of diversity that exist and should be considered when designing diversity training. Organizations should ensure that other forms of diversity (e.g., sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic background) are included.

Table 1 (Continued)

Category		
Myth	Reality	Recommendation
Diversity training should focus on making people colorblind.	Colorblindness is counterproductive in efforts to improve interracial interactions.	An effective strategy is to use a multicultural approach that recognizes similarities and also promotes acknowledgement and appreciation of inter-group differences.
Diversity training places blame on certain groups of people (particularly heterosexual white men).	Diversity training is meant to benefit everyone — including white men. The purpose of these trainings is to bring people together and enhance organizational effectiveness. In addition to celebrating allyship from majority group members, diversity training allows white men to learn more about diversity and break free from white male culture stereotypes.	Framing of diversity training matters. It is important to emphasize inclusion and provide a broad focus, as opposed to a narrow one (e.g., race). A broad focus prevents minority groups from feeling like tokens in an organization and majority groups from feeling as if they are not valued.
<i>Design and delivery</i>		
Diversity training is just like any other training.	The content of the training has an influence on the specific outcomes of the training and all training programs need to be tailored to serve their purpose.	Needs analyses can clarify critical components of diversity program content and delivery, such as scope, group assignment, and trainer characteristics.
One session is all that is needed.	One diversity session can be meaningful (e.g., by covering legal and compliance issues, self-reflection, perspective-taking) and impact diversity-related outcomes (e.g., diversity-supportive attitudes and behaviors). However, longer, temporally spaced diversity training is most effective in ensuring positive learning outcomes.	Although resource-strapped organizations can still benefit from shorter, single-session diversity training, it is best to opt for longer lasting programs to ensure positive learning outcomes.
Diversity training should always be mandatory.	There is mixed evidence for enforcing diversity trainings. Mandatory trainings may demonstrate essential organizational buy-in and thereby increase effectiveness. Yet, voluntary trainings may emphasize the benefits of diversity and increase motivation to learn.	Institutions should carefully consider whether or not a mandatory diversity training would result in backlash within their specific organization. Regardless of the status, management should demonstrate buy-in to increase motivation to participate among employees.
Anyone can lead diversity training.	Trainers must have appropriate knowledge and skills. It is also interesting to note that demographic aspects of the trainer may affect perceived training effectiveness.	Organizations should select trainers who have appropriate expertise and are able to facilitate sensitive education, and when possible, diversity trainings should include voices of underrepresented groups.
Organizational leaders do not need to be involved in diversity training to maximize its effectiveness.	The success of diversity initiatives depends on the visible and active support of leadership. Leadership support improves the adoption and perceived success of diversity training.	Leaders should demonstrate support for diversity training via high-visibility communication and engagement with the training.
People from marginalized groups do not need to go to diversity training.	Biases and discrimination exist both between and within each and every group within society (e.g., racism in the LGBT community and homophobia in the Black community). Therefore, all people can benefit from diversity training.	In addition to reducing bias and discrimination, diversity training interventions should enhance knowledge about other social groups; facilitate positive intergroup interactions; and improve trainees' skills, knowledge, and motivation to interact with diverse others — all goals that would not be possible without the presence and input of members from marginalized groups.
Diversity training is the only real diversity initiative that an organization needs.	Positive outcomes of diversity training may be greater when coupled with other diversity initiatives.	Along with diversity training, organizations should also include organizational and leader support, access to related resources, follow-up sessions, policies, consequences and rewards, continual feedback, and further opportunities to foster inclusion.

positive effect for voluntary (versus mandatory) training, as well as a boost in reactions for training groups with a larger percentage of women. Organizations might benefit from leveraging this information in designing their interventions to avoid backlash.

Diversity Training Always Does More Good than Harm

Despite the aforementioned positive effects of diversity training, there are also a number of potential negative outcomes, including backlash, discomfort, or even reinforcement of group stereotypes. Since diversity training often emphasizes sensitive topics and highlight blind spots or biases, it can elicit feelings of anger, defensiveness, and threat, particularly from members of high-status groups. These feelings can hinder the potential positive impacts of diversity training, diminishing trainees' motivation to learn and transfer the appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). In fact, these feelings can engender increased resentment and deepen divides between different groups.

In addition, diversity trainings can potentially de-legitimize discrimination claims, since such diversity initiatives can lead to an assumption of an organization's fairness, reducing the detection and condemnation of discrimination. Since many minority groups are already wary of claiming discrimination due to the accompanying social costs, such as less favorable evaluations, this is an important consequence to understand and combat. As a result, although diversity trainings are often well-intentioned, it is important for organizations and diversity trainers to be aware of potential negative outcomes and what impacts these outcomes within training content, design, and delivery. Employees should also be made aware that diversity trainings are not a cure-all, prejudice and discrimination can still occur post-training, and any future discrimination claims are still legitimate and should be taken seriously.

If People Did Not Like the Diversity Training, It Did Not Work

Another related myth that complicates understanding of diversity training is that organizations and trainers will assume that negative responses on a "smile sheet" or a trainee reaction survey is indication that a diversity program "failed". Administering a reaction survey is one of the easiest and most popular ways to obtain an immediate metric of a training's success. Consequently, using satisfaction to measure training success is common organizational practice. An inherent issue with this logic is that this perspective falsely equates training success with trainee satisfaction; however, this should not be the only outcome variable of importance to an organization. Some training is difficult due to high skill level or challenges to one's (often core) beliefs. In these cases, a trainee might not enjoy being challenged, but the training could still result in other desired outcomes. Training can and should be evaluated on a diverse nomological network of training outcomes. This likely includes measures of learning and behavioral outcomes. For example, the goals of diversity training in an organiza-

tion could be that trainees acquire new knowledge and skills so that they will act in more respectful ways.

Another problem with this perspective is that there is little evidence to substantiate the rationale that a positive reaction to training is a precursor to any further learning, behavior, and results. Instead, utility reactions to training may be more predictive of learning than affective reactions to training. In other words, trainees' perceptions that the training was useful and valuable in their jobs predicted their learning more than how much they liked the training. The overreliance on satisfaction evaluations as measures of training success contributes to the myth that if people do not like diversity training, it did not work. In reality, diversity training can have positive and negative effects on a range of attitudes, knowledge, and behavior, and the nature of these relationships depends in part on the content of the training itself.

The Diversity Training Return on Investment (ROI) is Unfavorable

A common belief about diversity training is that it is unlikely to yield a positive return on investment. This intuition can be traced partly to the actual financial costs of training programs in general, which can be quite high. This belief might also be influenced by the difficulty in measuring outcomes of diversity training programs in particular; if the effectiveness of diversity training is measured only by trainee satisfaction metrics (as noted above), deriving economic ROI estimates becomes impossible. Yet, what is not typically measured may in fact be quite valuable.

To the extent that diversity training programs are designed and implemented effectively, they might target skill development or behavioral adaptation that have the proximal outcome of reducing discrimination and improving cultural competence. The experience of discrimination has itself been linked with a variety of meaningful negative psychological and job consequences including increased turnover, and degraded engagement and well-being. These outcomes, taken with the financial costs of litigation, make reducing discrimination and enhancing cultural competence a lucrative proposition for organizations. Despite the myth, it is likely that the actual ROI for diversity training programs – taking into account the range of distal outcomes – is quite favorable.

MYTHS ABOUT CONTENT

Diversity Training is Just Common Sense

In 2015, an article titled "Instead of 'Diversity' Training, Try Common Sense" was published in the online Washington Examiner (<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/instead-of-diversity-training-try-common-sense/article/2577133>). This statement refers to the seemingly obvious conclusion that we need to see people as people and not as categories. This and other information that is sometimes conveyed in diversity training is perceived by some people to simply be a policy of good conscience. While it may seem like common sense, many people do not admit or are not aware of the biases that they hold. Even when a person does not

admit to having biases towards another group, they often exhibit automatic responses to suggest otherwise. People generally want to think of themselves as egalitarian, objective, and less susceptible to bias than others, but this is an inaccurate judgment due to a combination of limited cognitive availability and self-enhancement motives.

Diversity Training is Only about Championing the Rights of Minority and Underrepresented Groups

Diversity training can lead to positive outcomes for minority and underrepresented groups, including increased development and job opportunities. Nonetheless, while greater opportunity for minority groups is indeed a potential benefit of diversity training, it is but one of a multitude of outcomes. Other positive effects of diversity training may include those related to business, learning, and social justice. *Business impacts* that diversity training might lead to include enhanced financial outcomes, competitive advantage, improved productivity, and increased organizational commitment. *Learning* outcomes of diversity training could range from increased self-knowledge to better skills working with different others to enhanced skills needed to work with individuals of other cultures. Diversity training outcomes related to *social justice* might involve fair decision-making procedures, a justice-oriented organization, greater perceptions of organizational support, and a decrease in discrimination and harassment. All told, the positive impacts of diversity training might extend well beyond the championing of minority and underrepresented groups and into several levels within organizations.

Diversity Training is Only about “Doing the Right Thing”

Some people may perceive that diversity training is implemented by organizations to reflect the ethos of the organization and its leadership; however, valuing diversity and implementing diversity training is not solely related to morals and justice. There is a necessity to embrace diversity and a benefit to organizations. Organizations do voluntarily engage in corporate social responsibility initiatives to involve themselves in environmental, social, or economic issues of concern to their stakeholders. When organizations engage in corporate social responsibility, or other actions that indicate organizational values, their reputations among potential employees may change. When people are familiar with an organizational brand that has positive attributes, such as valuing diversity, they are likely to perceive that organization positively. Thus, an organization’s reputation influences its attractiveness to consumers. By fostering a positive reputation through positive values like diversity, an organization can improve its business standing. Consequently, diversity initiatives such as diversity training are not implemented simply to do the right thing, but also to benefit the organization.

Beyond reputation, there is evidence that more diverse organizations can outperform less diverse organizations. Embracing diversity in the coming decade will not just be a preference for organizations, but rather a necessity. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that in the next decade

there will continue to be large growth in the proportion of the workforce comprised of older workers (over 55 years of age) and Asian and Hispanic workers, among other diverse populations. More diverse workforces are underutilized resources that organizations have yet to tap. As the workforce continues to diversify and change in the coming decade, organizations will need to adjust in order to continue thriving by incorporating these changing demographics.

If for no other reason, organizations ought to pay attention to promoting diversity training as a protective legal measure. In 2017, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) resolved 99,109 workplace discrimination charges amounting to a total of \$484 million obtained for victims of discrimination. The EEOC was successful in 91% of resolved and secured an average of over \$388,000 for the victims in these cases (EEOC, 2018). Organizations should promote their own self-interest by increasing their incorporation of diverse talent, and decreasing their risk of backlash to discrimination by embracing diversity through initiatives like training.

One Can Take a Singular Approach to Training, Regardless of Diversity Issues

Many diversity trainings today are packaged and sold as “one size fits all” products. However, these off-the-shelf approaches do a disservice to diversity initiatives and can create disingenuous atmospheres and obfuscating organizational goals. Indeed, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC; <https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/promising-practices.cfm>) recommends that, in order to be maximally effective, interventions must be tailored to the needs of the organization. The training literature has thus underscored the importance of the needs analysis, in which data is systematically gathered to determine training goals. In particular, training needs analyses can clarify critical components of diversity program content and delivery, such as scope, group assignment, and trainer characteristics.

Comprehensive training needs analyses can and should be conducted at multiple levels, from the individual to operational systems. However, many researchers have recommended that the organizational level of analysis may be particularly important for diversity training, given that it audits cultural issues in working environments. Regardless of these empirically-based best practices, the vast majority of diversity training programs fail to conduct even the most basic analyses to determine baseline attitudes. In order to develop impactful interventions, training programs must understand and target organizational goals through systematic research and development.

Diversity is Just about Race and Gender

The idea of diversity often evokes images of women and racial minorities, and for good reason. Race and gender receive the lion’s share of research and media attention because they happen to be two of largest EEOC claim categories; however, while any characterization of diversity should certainly involve gender and race, these are by no means the only types of diversity that exist and should be

considered when designing diversity training. Diversity is much broader than that; there are many demographic and other diversity characteristics that are important.

Diversity can take many forms, including values, attitudes, sexual orientation, race, and gender, among many others, and researchers have made multiple distinctions among the differences and similarities that can exist between people. One such distinction that has taken hold in the literature and in practice is that between surface-level characteristics and deep-level characteristics. Surface-level characteristics are those that are readily apparent – such as gender, race, and age – while deep-level characteristics are those that are undetectable at the superficial level – such as attitudes, values, sexual orientation, education level, religious and political beliefs, physical abilities, and socioeconomic background. A significant body of research aimed at understanding the ways these various types of diversity interact and affect organizations and employees within them has been conducted. Ultimately, a needs analysis should be conducted to determine where the gaps are within the organization and thus what the diversity training should address.

Diversity Training Should Focus on Making People Colorblind

In recent decades, organizations have sought approaches to diversity initiatives that can help employees combat the challenges associated with talking about race. Colorblindness can be considered an approach to diversity initiatives characterized by ignoring or avoiding differences in interracial interactions. Although this approach has, in the past, been a popular strategy for designing diversity training (particularly amongst whites), colorblindness is much more harmful than it is helpful. In fact, colorblindness may be counterproductive in efforts to improve interracial interactions. Instead, a more multicultural approach to diversity initiatives promotes acknowledgement and appreciation of inter-group differences. Multicultural approaches may be much more effective in promoting diversity in organizations, are predictive of psychological engagement in employees, and lower perceptions of racial bias among minority employees. Emphasizing a multicultural approach can facilitate more positive interpersonal relationships and decrease the likelihood of backlash and employee discrimination.

Diversity Training Blames Certain Groups of People (Particularly Heterosexual White Men)

Outcomes of diversity training are meant to benefit everyone – even white men. Although some diversity training programs may unintentionally make white men feel guilty, full inclusion identifies white men as a part of cultural diversity or at least an important part of the solution. Diversity training programs that have a narrow focus of diversity (e.g., race) risk angering trainees. The targeted minority group can feel as if they are tokens in the organization, and the majority group can feel as if they are not valued because their majority identification is a burden on the diversity initiative. Framing of the training matters and providing a broad focus has a more favorable response from both male and female participants.

Another issue is that white men often do not see themselves as a part of the diversity outreach, but this type of

training is supposed to draw attention to the complexities of diversity to allow individuals to realize that nobody needs to fit one specific label (e.g., “white man”). As we cover in our counterargument to the myth, “Diversity is just about race and gender,” diversity is more than just sex, race, and sexual orientation; it can encompass religion, political views, physical abilities, age, and more. Some stereotypes of the white male culture can include focusing on rationality, preferring status over connection, and having a survivor mentality. However, a white male might differentiate himself from this, or identify more with other cultures (e.g., religious affiliation) in different aspects of his life. Learning about diversity might give white men the freedom to truly be themselves and discover parts of themselves that go beyond the boundaries of the white male culture. Also, rather than placing the blame on white heterosexual males, diversity training can celebrate having allies from majority groups. Their role in standing up for disadvantaged groups is powerful because it has no assumptions of self-interest. Therefore, the goal of diversity training is meant to bring everyone together to enhance organizational effectiveness.

MYTHS ABOUT DESIGN AND DELIVERY

Diversity Training is Just Like Any Other Training

Although the science of training can provide general guidelines for all training programs to follow (i.e., strong evidence supports the need for leader support, feedback, and conducting a needs analysis across different types of training programs), this does not mean that diversity training is just like any other training. First, conducting a needs analysis determines the specific issues in the organization that demand attention and can inform the content of the training. The content of the training has an influence on the specific outcomes of the training. For example, focusing on race, gender, and disability can change diversity perceptions of these groups, whereas a training program focused on technical skills should only influence the individual’s ability to improve that specific skill rather than change their diversity perceptions.

Diversity training programs also may have unique strategies for delivery and design methods that impact effectiveness. Rather than assume that a design method that works for leadership training also will work for diversity training, we need to conduct evaluations to see whether the effect remains. For example, Bezrukova and colleagues’ meta-analysis on diversity training found that – contrary to other kinds of training programs – mandatory programs had larger effects on behavioral learning and lower positive reactions than voluntary programs. It is possible that trainees are more impartial to being mandated to learn leadership skills as compared to diversity skills. This suggests that design and delivery methods need to be tailored for the specific type of program.

One Session is All That is Needed

Empirical research has shown that one diversity training session can indeed be meaningful. For example, one session is all it takes to provide trainees with new information, such

as content related to legal and compliance issues or cultural differences. Moreover, one session may allow trainees to self-reflect on their own biases or engage in perspective-taking. However, although one diversity training session can be meaningful and impact diversity-related outcomes, the EEOC (<https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/promising-practices.cfm>) and scientific consensus on learning and training suggests that training sessions delivered in a larger quantity, over a longer period of time, lead to greater learning and transfer for participants. In general, individuals whose practice is spaced over a period of time perform reliably better on tasks and develop more skills than individuals whose practice is massed into a single point in time.

Indeed, meta-analytic studies of diversity training efforts support these theories: Bezrukova and colleagues' analysis found that diversity training programs which are longer tend to be more effective. In their study, programs typically included around 24 h of training total. While longer, temporally spaced diversity training in general leads to better outcomes, quality of training design should still be emphasized in program development.

Diversity Training Should Always Be Mandatory

The question of whether diversity trainings should be mandatory or voluntary has incited some controversy. There exists a large school of thought that believes mandatory training demonstrates organizational buy-in and support, resulting in greater trainee effectiveness. Moreover, requiring participation will also ensure that the training is not just preaching to the choir, but reaching those who most need it. Many experts thus believe that diversity initiatives must be institutionalized.

However, this notion has been challenged by many researchers, who cite the importance of avoiding defensiveness and increasing motivation in trainees. First, voluntary trainings, rather than focusing on remedying past ills, could emphasize the value and organizational benefits of diversity — that is, not “punishing” but constructively engaging trainees. Second, voluntary programs might enhance trainees' motivation to learn and, ultimately, implement what they learned. At worst, mandating training can increase backlash in its participants.

Given these two extremes, experts must approach developing training structures with nuanced understanding. In their review of 43 mandatory and 63 voluntary diversity trainings found evidence for both mandatory and voluntary training effectiveness, Bezrukova and colleagues (2016) found that mandatory management attendance was positively associated with perceived training effectiveness. Ultimately, this area is not yet well-defined; further research should identify the specific conditions under which mandatory enforcement would be superior.

Anyone Can Lead Diversity Training

While it may seem that evidence-based diversity training content should be sufficient regardless of who delivers the training, research indicates that *who* delivers the training is integral to its effectiveness. Trainers, in particular, hold an influential role in legitimizing and shaping diversity trainings. Given the highly complex and sensitive nature of diversity

issues, it is critical to choose experts with appropriate qualifications. Trainers must have both professional/academic knowledge (such as expertise in evaluation, group dynamics, and historical diversity issues) and personal/interpersonal skills (including communication skills, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution abilities). Rather than defaulting to individuals in the HR department, organizations can carefully consider the needs of their employees and content of the training in order to select the optimal trainers.

Research examining the social psychological principles behind these phenomena have illustrated a number of potential causes for these reactions. When confronted about prejudiced viewpoints, perpetrators see a target's confrontation as more of an overreaction than an identical non-target confrontation, and target confrontations elicited greater feelings of irritation and antagonism amongst more prejudiced perpetrators (Czopp, A. M., & Monteith, M. J. 2003. Confronting Prejudice (Literally): Reactions to Confrontations of Racial and Gender Bias. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29(4): 532–544.). This reaction may be fueled by how perpetrators of discrimination process and interpret ally messages. In particular, when a source's unexpected position violates individual self-interest, they are perceived as more trustworthy; conversely, when it violates group interest, it enhances message processing.

Organizational Leaders Do Not Need to Be Involved in Diversity Training to Maximize Its Effectiveness

Leaders are important symbols and actors in organizations who establish organizational culture and can have significant effects on their followers through their vision and inspiration. These leaders engage the self-concepts of their followers in the organization's mission and consequently inspire greater motivation. The power of leadership extends to a power to affect and motivate in the context of diversity training. The success of diversity training depends on visible and active leadership, organizational culture, and motivation. Support of diversity from management is necessary to create a diversity climate across an organization.

Leadership participation and valuing of diversity training improves that effectiveness of diversity trainings. According to Shen and colleagues (Shen, J., Chanda, A., D'Netto, B., & Monga, M. 2009. Managing diversity through human resource management: An international perspective and conceptual framework. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 20: 235-251.) there are three levels of human resources management involvement in managing diversity: strategic, tactical, and operational. At the strategic level, leaders must engage as the driving force behind a vision, mission, and culture supporting diversity. The operational level includes more granular facets or an organization such as training. Both levels of involvement interact to affect diversity in an organization. Leaders should be visibly involved in diversity training to maximize its effects by establishing an organizational culture of diversity and consistently supporting diversity.

People from Marginalized Groups Do not Need to Go to Diversity Training

Because one of the primary ultimate goals of diversity training is to decrease prejudice, stereotypes, and other biases, and marginalized groups are typically on the receiv-

ing end of such biases, it may seem — at the surface — logical that members of these marginalized groups do not need to participate in diversity training. They are not the ones who need to improve, right? Well, not quite. This would be an oversimplification of the nature of bias.

While members of marginalized groups are targets of discrimination, they are not immune to holding biases themselves. Biases and discrimination exist both between and within each and every group within society, and this is part of what makes diversity work so challenging. For example, there exists racism in the LGBT community and homophobia in the Black community. These are but two examples of members of marginalized groups possessing biases toward and discriminating against members of other marginalized groups. Categorizing things and people are what humans do, and it is most often unintentional. It is our way of making sense of the world without spending an inordinate amount of cognitive effort sorting through all the information we perceive and need to process.

The benefit of the inclusion of marginalized group members in diversity training does not stop at the reduction of their biases, however. In addition to reducing bias and discrimination, diversity training intervention should enhance knowledge about other social groups; facilitate positive intergroup interactions; and improve trainees' skills, knowledge, and motivation to interact with diverse others — all goals that would not be possible without the presence and input of members of marginalized groups. Indeed, in their diversity training meta-analysis, Bezrukova and colleagues (2016) found that the more female trainees there were, the more favorable reactions to diversity training were. Moreover, in a similar diversity training meta-analysis, Kalinoski et al. (Kalinoski, Z. T., Steele-Johnson, D., Peyton, E. J., Leas, K. A., Steinke, J., & Bowling, N. A. 2013. A meta-analytic evaluation of diversity training outcomes. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 34(8): 1076-1104.) found larger training effects on cognitive-based outcomes for training groups that were less than 40% Caucasian, compared to training groups that were greater than 60% Caucasian, and for training groups that were greater than 60% women, compared with training groups that were less than 40% women. These studies underscore the importance of including members of marginalized groups in diversity training — not just for their own benefit, but for the benefit of the organization as a whole.

Diversity Training is the Only Real Diversity Initiative That an Organization Needs

Implementing change in people's attitudes and behaviors does not stop at a single training program. The science behind training suggests that they are most effective when complemented by other initiatives. When the organization reinforces the desired attitudes and behaviors, it signals the importance of the training to the trainees. Otherwise, trainees may not understand the true value of the competencies taught and will struggle to sustain the positive outcomes over time. Creating a supportive climate involves implementing initiatives such as organizational and leader support, access to related resources, follow-up sessions, policies, consequences and rewards, continual feedback, and further opportunities to foster continual improvement. This is no exception for diversity training. Many initiatives paired with diversity training can be implemented to magnify its impact. As Bezrukova and

colleagues (2016) point out in their meta-analysis, positive outcomes of diversity training were greater when coupled with other diversity initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Our review confirms that diversity training is certainly not a passing trend. By addressing relevant myths, we work to dispel inaccuracies in order to improve the implementation of diversity training. By carefully curating the content, design, and delivery of trainings, we can increase overall evaluative accuracy and effectiveness of these trainings. The evidence we described contradicts lay assumptions about training and, in so doing, points to several key features of effective diversity training.

The question of whether or not diversity training is effective sets up a false dichotomy. Depending on its development and implementation, diversity training can be effective in changing some outcomes, in some contexts, for some people. First and foremost, administrators and trainers must take care to clearly understand the needs of the target audience and the contexts in which they work. Organizations must conduct comprehensive needs analyses in order to clarify critical training requirements and elements. Identifying and applying these parameters will help shape content, design and delivery, and evaluation.

In general, focusing on similarities, rather than differences, may reduce backlash and improve learning. Majority group members, such as white men, can often feel like diversity initiatives are placing the blame on them. However, diversity is not only about race and gender, or even marginalized groups. It is about bringing people together to enhance organizational (and societal) effectiveness. As a result, it is important for diversity trainings to be inclusive and work to benefit everyone. To achieve buy-in, organizations should emphasize the empirically-demonstrated benefits of diversity training that extend beyond just championing the rights of specific groups, such as competitive advantage, increased self-knowledge, and fairer decision-making.

It is also important to note that diversity initiatives should not stop at a single diversity training session. Diversity training takes time, and although a single session can be valuable, it is more fruitful when conducted over multiple sessions. Trainings should also be paired with other initiatives, such as providing access to related resources, follow-up sessions, policies, consequences and rewards, continual feedback, and further opportunities to foster continual improvement in the diversity initiatives. In addition, it is critical that organizations understand who must be involved. Trainees of all identities can benefit from diversity trainings, not just one targeted group. Skilled trainers should teach trainees by including diverse voices from marginalized identities. At a higher level, management and leadership must be instrumentally supportive of diversity training to foster a positive diversity climate. When these key people are involved, diversity training will achieve greater success.

Importantly, regardless of how it is done, diversity training will remain a substantial part of overall diversity initiatives within organizations for several reasons. First, the changing demographic composition of the American workforce necessitates continuing attention to organizational

diversity. Predictions from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that in the coming decades, Americans will be more diverse than ever. As technology, transportation and policy change the nature of work, organizations are becoming increasingly diverse across a number of dimensions, including: gender, age, nationality, and racial and ethnic composition. In the workforce, Whites are no longer likely to comprise a majority, the presence of Asian and Hispanic immigrants are particularly likely to increase, and Hispanics are projected to be nearly one-fifth of the labor force.

Second, ongoing societal events such as those described in the opening paragraph highlight the ongoing relevance of diversity issues. Diversity awareness is driven by significant demographic and legal changes in workplaces, sustained over time. Simultaneously, workplace discrimination has increased, resulting in an uptick in anti-discriminatory litigation that can cost companies millions of dollars. Taken together, these trends suggest that diversity merits administrative attention.

Third, training is a key human resource practice and response to organizational problems, and in fact is the primary strategic mechanism through which employees' KSAs are developed. Indeed, organizations are increasingly concerned with managing diversity sensitively and responsibly. They have demonstrably invested in diversity initiatives and already, these trainings have yielded seen dividends.

Finally, the "business case for diversity" is achieved when diverse employees are supported. Research by McKay and colleagues (McKay, P. F., Avery, D. R., Tonidandel, S., Morris, M. A., Hernandez, M., & Hebl, M. R. 2007. Racial differences in employee retention: Are diversity climate perceptions the key?. *Personnel Psychology*, 60(1): 35-62.) has shown that the dividends of diversity depend on managers and employees manifesting the kinds of KSAs that might be enhanced through training. These signs of the times and bottom lines only point towards the increasing importance of diversity initiatives.

In sum, we hope this article changes the conversation about diversity training. A large number of varied, sometimes even contradictory, inaccurate beliefs exist. These inaccuracies may arise from a number of sources such as entrenched political ideologies, sensationalized media coverage, and information processing biases. Herein, we leverage common misperceptions toward new theory and practice; by challenging common myths about diversity training, we gain new insight into the many nuances of people and contexts that maximize its effectiveness.

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