DIVERSITY

Unlike the use of the term diversity in a legal sense, most intercultural diversity educators use the term diversity in its broadest sense. They would take into consideration cultural differences and co-cultural differences of all sorts. Cultural differences, of course, refer to differences between the people of various countries or regions of the world. Co-cultural differences refer to significant differences in thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, rituals, behaviors and communication styles exhibited by various groups within one culture. Some of these differing co-cultural groups could include, but would not be limited to, the following: racial co-cultures, gender co-cultures, physical ability co-cultures, regional co-cultures, population density co-cultures, and socioeconomic co-cultures. When diversity is used in the broader sense, it is fully inclusive. Virtually no co-cultural group will likely feel excluded or victimized by special regulations or privileges not granted to all.

When institutions and organizations decide that increasing the diversity of their organization or institution would be a good thing, they often begin with the faulty assumption that all that is needed is a good recruiting program. Few institutions or organizations stop to ponder the question of why they are not already diverse.

A competent farmer who looks at a field where little or nothing grows will not likely assume that just sticking some plants in the ground will make for a lush, green field. That farmer would know that before the
planting is done the soil of that field would need to be amended to make for a better and a more viable environment for the plants.

Most often organizational or institutional climate is not resistant to diversity, but it has not been properly prepared to incorporate differing modes of perception and differing modes of communication into its environment. The best recruiting on the planet will not compensate for an institutional or organizational climate that is unprepared to understand the different modes of perception and communication that diversity brings to an institution or organization. Unrepresented or underrepresented co-cultural groups are rarely retained in an environment that tends to discount their co-culturally driven modes of operation (perception and communication).

If an organization or institution is not naturally diverse, this lack of diversity or this inadequate level of diversity may have been generated by the ethnocentric nature of that institution or organization. Ethnocentrism is a very natural state of human existence. Ethnocentrism does not represent some great evil or some deeply rooted conspiracy. Ethnocentrism is just a habitual way of thinking which indicates that our group is the best and that our way of doing things is the right way of doing them. Every cultural or co-cultural group exhibits this characteristic.

In general, it is education and life experience that will reduce ethnocentric tendencies. However, general education and general life experiences may not alone reduce enough of these ethnocentric tendencies, and it will take a considerable amount of time for this to
occur. Specific intercultural education for members of an organization or institution will get more people to the same level of ethno-relative behavior faster and more efficiently. Ethno-relative behavior is behavior where cultural and co-cultural differences can be recognized, understood, and respected.

The major point that I desire to have linger in memory is that diversity will only work on a long-term basis where institutional and organizational climates are able to understand, embrace, and respect cultural and co-cultural differences. When each institution or organization has an active and competent program of intercultural diversity education, then each organizational or institutional member will have the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and the communication skills necessary to make diversity a viable characteristic of that institution or organization.

A competent intercultural diversity education program will provide the necessary cultural and co-cultural information and will help people acquire the necessary communication skills to allow effective and meaningful interaction between differing cultural and co-cultural groups. A competent intercultural diversity education program does not use guilt, does not rewrite history, does not attempt to generate a climate of universal love, and does not begin with the assumption that people are broken and need to be fixed. A competent intercultural diversity education program is very practical in its approach; it should provide a baseline level of knowledge and communication skills as well as generate a desire for individual self-learning. A competent intercultural diversity education program
requires time; there should be a minimum of 28 interactive contact hours over a period of six months (possible) or a year (ideal).

If the diversity issue was one that had simple solutions, it likely would have been handled by now. If diversity is an issue that can adequately be dealt with at all, it will take effort and commitment on the part of institutions and organizations to create a fertile climate. If the climate is fertile, diversity will come.

Ron Howell
5012 N. Best
Peoria Heights, Illinois 61616-5104