

# Two Types of Diversity Training That Really Work

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One of the most common ways that companies attempt to address organizational diversity is through formal training. Yet research on the effectiveness of such programs has yielded mixed results: Some studies show that diversity training is effective, others show it's ineffective, and still others show that it may actually lead to backlash. This has led to pessimism regarding diversity training, with some claiming it simply doesn't work.

We believe that pessimism is premature. For one, a recent meta-analysis of over 40 years of diversity training evaluations showed that diversity training *can* work, especially when it targets awareness and skill development and occurs over a significant period of time. But this doesn't mean there's a single perfect solution to creating diverse and inclusive organizations. Diversity training effectiveness depends on the specific training method used, the personality characteristics of those who are trained, and the specific outcomes that are measured after training concludes.

Our research highlights how changing a few aspects of diversity training might actually make a difference, depending on how they're applied within organizations. While our work takes the form of small-scale experiments with undergraduate students, we believe it has potential to be used smartly inside companies. And since undergraduate students are undoubtedly future employees, we view uncovering what works for this group as a first step in discovering what might work for the broader population of working adults. Additionally, using a population of students affords us a greater degree of experimental control (by incorporating a control condition where no diversity training is received for comparison purposes, comparing the effects of specific training exercises with one another, and measuring multiple outcomes over time), which allows us to uncover truths regarding diversity training effectiveness in a way that may not be as feasible in businesses or other organizations.

One training exercise that we analyzed, and that shows promise, is perspective-taking, which is essentially the process of mentally walking in someone else's shoes. Results from our experiment involving 118 undergraduate students showed that taking the perspective of LGBT individuals or racial minorities – by writing a few sentences imagining the distinct challenges a marginalized minority might face – can improve pro-diversity attitudes and behavioral intentions toward these groups. These effects persisted even when outcomes were measured eight months after training. Even more exciting is the fact that perspective-taking was shown to be capable of producing crossover effects. In our experiment, taking the perspective of LGBT individuals was shown to be associated with more positive attitudes and behaviors toward racial minorities, and vice versa.

Another activity that has empirical support is goal setting. Recent evidence shows that this strategy – more broadly used to motivate improved aspects of someone's job performance – can be successfully adapted by asking diversity training participants to set specific, measurable, and challenging (yet attainable) goals related to diversity in the workplace. For example, a trainee might

set a goal to challenge inappropriate comments about marginalized groups when overhearing them in the future (in combination with receiving information about how best to handle such situations). Our experiment with 158 undergraduate students showed that goal setting within diversity training led to more pro-diversity behaviors three months after training and improved pro-diversity attitudes nine months after training. These long-lasting effects are notable, given that diversity training sessions in organizations are usually few and far between.

Both of these exercises (perspective-taking and goal setting) produced effects on behavioral outcomes, such as displaying more support and engaging in less mistreatment toward marginalized minorities. These are arguably the most important outcomes, but are often neglected in diversity training research in favor of attitudinal outcomes (the prejudice and bias that one feels toward marginalized groups) and cognitive outcomes (how well-informed someone is regarding stereotypes and biases against marginalized groups).

Our work also shows that personality characteristics may influence the effectiveness of training, making particular strategies more effective for some employees and less effective for others. For example, perspective-taking may be more effective for individuals who lack empathy than for those who are highly empathetic. We think this is the case because individuals who are high in empathy may be more likely to engage in spontaneous perspective-taking on their own, whereas individuals who are low on this characteristic may need a diversity training activity as a prompt. Similarly, our work (which we presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology) has shown that individuals who are high on social dominance orientation – the degree to which an individual prefers majority groups dominating minorities within a social hierarchy – tend to be more resistant to diversity training than individuals who are low on this trait. However, there is hope: Having an authority figure endorse the importance of diversity initiatives can enhance the effect of training for these individuals, in effect providing a means to appeal to and reach potentially resistant trainees.

So, as you design or tweak your company's diversity training program, keep these findings in mind. A blanket program will likely be a waste of your time – and your employees' time. But by tailoring empirically supported exercises and activities to your goals and your employees' characteristics, you can make progress in making your organization more welcoming and inclusive.

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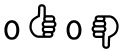
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