

Diversity and Affirmative Action: Difference

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"Diversity is just Affirmative Action with a new coat of paint," is a frequent comment heard whenever the topic of diversity is discussed. But a deeper look into the differences between diversity and affirmative action may help to answer that question. While there is some overlap both in philosophy and practice, there are significant differences, as outlined below.

Motivation

Affirmative Action changes are driven by law. Affirmative action has its roots in the Civil Rights Movement and Equal Employment Opportunity legislation of the '60s. It is a remedial approach, righting past wrongs. Employers have been expected to make a positive effort to recruit, hire, train, and promote employees of previously excluded groups. Managing diversity, on the other hand, is strategically driven, and brings a pragmatic orientation. It focuses on benefits to the organization. Capitalizing on diversity is seen as contributing to organizational goals such as profit, productivity, and morale, rather than just avoiding lawsuits or meeting legal requirements.

Targeted groups

Affirmative action is selective in mandating changes that benefit previously disadvantaged groups. Diversity is inclusive, encompassing everyone in the workplace. It seeks to create a working environment in which everyone and every group fits, feels accepted, has value, and contributes.

Bringing People in

Affirmative action generally uses an assimilation approach, expecting that people brought into the system will adapt to existing conditions. Diversity operates with a different approach: a synergy model. This view assumes that the diverse groups will devise new, creative ways of working that will move beyond the way we've always done things to improve the organization.

Desired Results

Affirmative action is numbers oriented, aimed at changing the demographics within the organization. Managing diversity is behavioral, aimed at changing the organizational culture, and developing skills and policies that get the best from everyone. Affirmative action opens doors in the organization while managing diversity opens the culture and the system. Managing diversity does not replace affirmative action; rather, it builds on the critical foundation laid by workplace equity programs. Affirmative action and managing diversity go hand-in-hand, each reinforcing the gains of the other. Without affirmative action's commitment to hiring and promoting diverse employees, organizations would rarely have the diversity of staff to reach a stage where differences are valued and diversity is effectively managed. Once diverse staff are on board, the Organization can focus on creating an inclusive environment where everyone's needs and values are taken into account, where no one is disadvantaged because of his or her differentness, and where organizational policies and management practices work for everyone.