



The Diversity Journey

Part 2: Diversity Assessments and Understanding the Culture

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In our last article, we emphasized the importance of establishing a clear vision of success for The Diversity Journey. A clear vision considers the expectations of all key stakeholders and sets the foundation for long-term success. Different groups will have different expectations of diversity success and establishing a clear vision will help clarify the direction for all.

After you are clear on where you are going, you have to answer the key question: *Where are we now?* A diversity assessment helps to answer this question by:

- Helping an organization clearly understand their current culture and not overreact to a concern.
- Taking a systemic look at the problem to identify root causes.
- Involving everyone in setting the foundation for long-term change.

Our client contacts often tell us that they're aware of their issues and ask, "Why is an assessment needed?" A diversity assessment is needed because you want to understand the issues through the eyes of all stakeholders and ensure you are working on the real issue rather than symptoms of the problem. The more you involve the entire organization in the assessment process, the more they are willing to be a part of the solution.

How does a diversity assessment differ from the most frequently used vehicle: an environmental or attitude survey? Both processes attempt to assess the same subject — the perception of the work environment — however, the diversity assessment does so through a diversity lens.

For example, let's examine the question: *Are hiring practices fair at my organization?* The results of a traditional survey could yield overall positive agreement on this question across the organization. However, as you further evaluate the results of various demographic groups, the responses become more telling.

For instance, while the overall impression might be one of fairness, employees under the age of 25 perceive unfairness. Since one of the key goals of diversity is to ensure equity and fairness across the organization, the key qualifier becomes *fairness and equity through whose eyes?*

In order to truly understand diversity and its dynamics, you have to honor the concept that 'perception is reality.' Are the hiring practices fair at my organization? Some people may respond "Yes" and some people may say "No." Both answers are totally acceptable based on each person's perspective. Organizations must value and address the distinctions behind these conflicting perceptions. The fact that a job posting system is in place does not ensure fairness and equity. For example, you can post all jobs; however, some managers might inform their favorite candidates about the job ahead of time.



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Other managers will use the posting system as a formality and still hire their favorite person without genuinely considering other viable candidates. These dynamics become key barriers to achieving the overall vision of diversity success, so they must be addressed in order to create a truly equitable environment.

The diversity assessment can evaluate several components of an organization's effectiveness both internally and externally. Internally, you can assess the commitment of leadership, demographic representation, the inclusion level of the workplace, and the fairness and equity in the people processes and practice. Externally, you can assess the organization's understanding of the diverse market, its reputation among nontraditional groups — both through the image of the organization and relationships with the impacted communities — as well as its spending allocations with diverse vendors. As we understand the vision of success for the organization, the areas of focus can be customized to the organization's needs.

There are several types of diversity assessment methods available to organizations:

- *Processes and practices review* – Review of current information and activities
- *Multiple-choice survey* – Questionnaire with various answers to choose from
- *Open-ended survey* – Questionnaire requiring written responses
- *Focus groups and interviews* – Facilitator-led discussions
- *Open forum discussions* – Open discussions on various topics

Here are the factors that distinguish the most appropriate vehicle to use:

- *Motivation* – Reason for assessing: proactive or reactive
- *Organizational receptivity* – Readiness level of the organization
- *Past experience* – Assessments that have been done to date
- *Size* – Organization-wide, business units, department levels, team levels, etc.
- *Subject being assessed* – Overall cultural assessment or a specific process (e.g. recruiting process, team cultural issues, etc.)
- *Demographics of the group* – Level of diversity among those assessed
- *Locations of the group* – Single or multiple locations
- *Desired results* – Overall culture or specific area of focus
- *Logistics* – Timeframe, resources, availability, budget allocations, etc.

The value of conducting a diversity assessment in your organization is far reaching. When you review all of the benefits (as outlined in the adjacent list), you can be confident that the strategy and action plans you develop will truly serve the needs of your organization. Regardless of which method you choose to implement, a comprehensive diversity organizational assessment is a sound baseline for organizational change and improvement.



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Benefits of Conducting a Diversity Assessment

- Management gains credibility by seeking feedback in a confidential, non-confrontational setting. By encouraging an exchange of diverse viewpoints, employees learn there is a willingness to listen, which in itself creates hope and the space for positive change.
- Clarity is gained regarding organizational strengths and opportunities for improvements through in-depth probing.
- Executives and key managers learn about diversity, cultural change, and organizational effectiveness through the interview process.
- Organizational "gaps" between the company's stated culture and the day-to-day reality of employees are revealed.
- Focus group participants realize they are part of the change process, rather than waiting for management to "fix it."
- Realistic "next steps" are identified through the interviews and focus group participants' recommendations.
- Organizations that begin a diversity initiative with an assessment and executive involvement are more likely to spend their time resolving the real issue, focus their improvement efforts where it is needed most, reach the highest level of best diversity practices, and achieve their targeted business results.
- An assessment of the current organization and culture provides a baseline against which progress and improvement can be measured.