

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Frank Dobbin Was Absent and Unaccounted For

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Frank Dobbin never sat in on one of my diversity presentations. If he had, he would not have stated so confidently that diversity training does not work. Any Human Resources (HR) professional who cites Dobbin's research as their reason for eliminating diversity training on gay and transgender issues is either disinterested in the company's gay and transgender employees, or has never attended a good presentation on the topic.

Based upon data that is 12 years old, the Harvard University professor of sociology concluded that diversity training does not work, nor do Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). But his sole criterion for making these assertions is whether the company's goal was to increase the number of women and racial minorities in management.

In response to this study on women and minority affirmative action, the black female Director of HR of a firm with which I am familiar has curtailed all diversity training in favor of mentoring, which Dobbin recommends as a means of getting women and blacks into positions of responsibility. That appears to be the chief objective of the HR Director in question. She may achieve her affirmative action goal, but she is radically and carelessly setting back the advances made in Diversity and Inclusion at her corporation. She has thus doomed the company to failure in its attempt to attract and retain the best and brightest employees, and to effectively market to the entire community.

Dobbin's report on "Evidence-Based Diversity Management" was funded by the National Science Foundation, the Russell Sage Foundation, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. It provides vindication to people who were infuriated in the past by their mandatory participation in an angry, guilt-driven presentation by an unskilled trainer with an axe to grind. It has also given an arsenal of ammunition to social conservatives who oppose the education of others on the issues facing gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees.

Dobbin says mandatory training does not work because people resent being told what to do, and diversity presentations in general fail to change people's beliefs. I strongly disagree. Mandatory training of senior managers is essential if you expect attendance by busy, distracted, and unenthused people, some of whom are among the few whose behaviors are most disruptive to the corporate culture. Over the years, I have been approached by dozens of people who stay after a training to say "I didn't want to come to this but I'm really glad I did. I learned a lot. Thank you."

Written evaluations of my training by attendees consistently affirm the value of the presentation in changing attitudes about gay and transgender people, and of raising awareness of how bad behaviors can affect teamwork. But my diversity training is not angry or guilt-driven, I do not have an axe to grind, and my goal is not to see more gay and transgender people in management, nor to see more women or blacks there.

That is how I know that Frank Dobbin never attended one of my corporate diversity trainings. Had he, his report would have been sure to state clearly that his results should not be taken as proof of anything other than that classes on race and gender do not increase the presence of blacks and women in management. If Dobbin cared about the conditions in which gay and transgender people work, he would have made sure corporate HR Directors did not use his work to support their biases about diversity training, or the importance of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion.

When Dobbin concludes that Employee Resource Groups bring together people on the lowest rungs of the corporate ladder and, as such, can not help women and blacks become senior managers, he again dangerously creates the illusion that money is wasted in the corporate support of ERGs. His study does not show the importance of ERGs in marketing corporate goods and services to their communities, in recruiting and retaining the best employees, in educating management and other employees to the problems faced by minorities in the workplace, and in breaking down stereotypes by putting faces on the issues.

The conclusions of Dobbin's report that I most affirm are that to be successful in achieving diversity goals, corporations need to create respected Diversity Councils that involve buy-in from people of influence on the business side of the company, and that mentoring enables executives to break down stereotypes by working with people different from themselves.

The enormous negative influence of Dobbin's report will grow and remain for decades, I fear, outlasting me and the misguided HR Directors who cite his work in support of their bias. It is important that everyone concerned about diversity and inclusion be aware of what he said, and why he said it.