

Managing Diversity

Legislative Compliance or Cultural Change!

We are now in an era where great changes are occurring in anti-discrimination legislation and which is seeing the introduction of specific codes of practice and standards to address the issue of workforce diversity. The range of public authorities and those organisations that carry out work on their behalf are the primary targets for initiating these changes. However these are just the forerunners - organisations generally will have to take on the added responsibility of promoting and developing processes which value diversity within the workforce and enable them to respond to the needs of a diverse community.

The last eighteen months has seen the introduction of the specific duties contained in the Race Relations Amendment Act, the Racial Equality Scheme and the Equality Standard - and there is more to come on Disability Rights and age discrimination. All of these changes have resulted in the rush for public authorities to meet the deadlines on publishing their equality and diversity plans and strategies.

However a major concern is whether this turns out to be just another procedural fad that can be handled by human resource specialists or appropriate professionals, or whether it is a real attempt to alter our perceptions and behaviours?

The recurrent question still remains - can a focus on compliance really lead to culture change and the creation of an environment that genuinely values diversity?

The Equality Standard with its continuous improvement focus, community consultation requirements, target setting and review process is the first national systematic approach to managing diversity. It links closely to other quality approaches and Best Value initiatives and it is perhaps the most likely instrument to facilitate cultural change. It emphasizes the need for regular briefing and training and development for the whole workforce on diversity awareness and management, as well as the development of policies, processes and working practices. As such, it helps to identify hidden barriers to inclusion that make it difficult for people who are perceived to be different. It also calls for increased development interventions that help individuals to understand their prejudices and alter their behaviours. It also acts as a valuable template for combating stereotyping, harassment and inappropriate behaviour both within the workforce and in dealing with customers and their constituent communities.

This blend of institutional change and training and development has the greatest potential to succeed. Our recent experience in advising several public authorities indicates that there is a general desire to make it work and that this is the best opportunity to achieve genuine cultural change.

Its great value is the recognition it gives to the fact that people from different backgrounds can bring fresh ideas and perceptions which can make 'the way we work and deal with our customers more effective and lead to better services and products'.