

# **FIVE STEPS TO CREATE A CLIMATE FOR DIVERSITY**

## **Tyrone Holmes**

*Tyrone A. Holmes, EdD is the president of T.A.H. Performance Consultants, Inc., a full-service human resource development consulting firm specializing in the enhancement of individual and organizational performance. As a dynamic speaker, trainer, consultant, and author, Tyrone has helped countless individuals enhance their ability to communicate, resolve conflict, and solve problems in culturally diverse settings. He has created and copyrighted numerous training systems, and speaks on a variety of communication, diversity, and consulting topics including connecting diversity to performance, improving communication in culturally diverse settings, and leading teams in the 21st century. Tyrone is also a past contributor to the **Sourcebooks**.*



### **Contact Information:**

30307 Sterling Drive  
Novi, MI 48377  
248.669.5294  
248.669.5295 (fax)  
tyrone@doctorholmes.net  
www.doctorholmes.net

**Overview** As we enter the 21st century, America continues to transform itself into one of the most culturally diverse societies on earth. Whether it is based on race, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or physical ability, you are more likely than ever to find yourself in a culturally diverse organizational setting. For example, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, 85 percent of new entrants to the workforce are women, people of color, and immigrants. The other 15 percent are white males. People of color (defined as Hispanics, African Americans, Asian-Pacific Americans, and Native Americans) represent one-third of all Americans, a number that will surpass 50 percent by 2050. The fastest growing groups in America consist of Asian-Pacific Americans and Hispanics over the age of 50.

It is imperative that we create work environments in which members accept, respect, and effectively utilize diversity as a source of added value. Such *culturally empowered environments* engage in practices that fully recognize the significant benefits of diversity and maximize the likelihood of success for a diverse range of people. All organizations can help to create culturally empowered environments by proactively employing the following five steps in this handout.

# FIVE STEPS TO CREATE A CLIMATE FOR DIVERSITY

1. *Create opportunities for culturally different individuals to interact with each other continuously:* Recognize that you cannot simply cluster people with significant cultural differences and expect them to connect on their own naturally. Of course, some will, but even more will not. You can proactively facilitate cross-cultural interaction through structured ice-breakers and social events, team-building activities, group projects and assignments, and cross-training interventions. The key is to make sure that people have an opportunity to interact on an ongoing basis, not just now and then.
2. *Help employees develop the skills they need to effectively communicate, resolve conflicts, and solve problems in culturally diverse settings:* Such skills include the abilities to communicate across cultural differences, to resolve diversity-based conflicts, to provide coaching and mentoring for a diverse range of employees, and to contribute to the creation of culturally empowered environments. Keep in mind that organizational members do not develop these skills overnight. However, with ongoing developmental opportunities and the chance to apply newly developed skills on the job, increased competency levels become evident, and they will have a positive impact on both individual and organizational performance.
3. *Develop, implement, and enforce antiharassment and antidiscrimination policies:* This includes providing skills-based training that teaches managers and supervisors to effectively challenge inappropriate comments and behavior. It includes a systematic process for communicating the policies to employees and letting them know what they should do if they feel they are the victims of harassing or discriminatory behavior. Most important, you have a specific process to handle complaints in a timely and comprehensive fashion.
4. *Actively work to recruit a high-quality, culturally diverse workforce:* This can create a significant competitive advantage for your organization. Many companies have improved their performance and their ability to serve a diverse customer base by proactively focusing on the creation of high-quality, culturally diverse candidate pools for their positions. By “enlarging the net” to recruit top candidates, and by improving the climate for diversity, you can significantly improve business performance.
5. *Ensure that organizational policies and practices support a diverse workforce:* For example, many top diversity practitioners reward managers for effective diversity leadership in the form of bonuses and merit increases. They recognize the holidays and celebrations of various cultural groups, and ensure that the physical environment (such as artwork, posters, and other visual displays) reflects an appreciation for diversity. They also implement flexible work practices and develop compensation systems that fit the needs of diverse organizational members.

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