ROCHESTER AREA BUSINESS ETHICS FOUNDATION

PRACTICAL ETHICS FOR PRACTICAL MANAGERS

DIVERSITY

Diversity is voluntary, and can obviously be applied by any business entity. Here is useful language:

> Diversity is a reality in labor markets and customer markets today. To be successful in working with and gaining value from this diversity requires a sustained, systemic approach and long-term commitment. Success is facilitated by a perspective that considers diversity to be an opportunity for everyone in an organization to learn from each other how better to accomplish their work and an occasion that requires a supportive and cooperative organizational culture as well as group leadership and process skills that can facilitate effective group functioning. Organizations that invest their resources in taking advantage of the opportunities that diversity offers should outperform those that fail to make such investments.[1]

True diversity examines the workplace from the standpoint of supporting diversity of people, cultures and ideas in the workplace. That can be accomplished by making it a policy and practice of the company for all personnel to help each other achieve their goals. It goes without saying that everyone, including employees and prospective employees, should be treated fairly – and that means everyone, irrespective of factors such as race, color, national origin, sexual preference, disability, sex, age or religion.

Some object to diversity, pointing out that things tend to be friendlier and to run more smoothly when everyone "is on the same page" and gets along famously. Bosses tend to hire people who think like they do, and they use the same standard to promote people. They argue that this relieves the workplace of tension and acrimony.

But the risk of being "on the same page" is enormous. The utter collapse of a company called Enron arose in large part from the fact that all the power people came from similar backgrounds and thought alike. When the executives were undertaking conduct that was so out of line that many of them later went to jail, no one said "Stop, don't do it." Some refer to this as a lack of intellectual diversity. That same sort of thing can happen in a very small company.

People's capacity to perform a job does not necessarily have anything to do with traditional measures such as IQ or capacity to do well in standardized tests, which have often been used as a way to keep people of color out of the workplace or keep them from advancement. On the other hand, proper and ethical standards for hiring and for promotions should be made clear to everyone in the work force in order to address claims by some of reverse discrimination.

In the end, diversity initiatives should be designed to treat all employees fairly to achieve a business objective - in compliance with the law. They should also be discussed openly and frequently.

[1] Society for Human Resource Management, http://www.shrm.org/foundation/kochan_keyfindings.asp

The articles in this series were written by David L. Hoffberg, a member of the Steering Committee of the Rochester Area Business Ethics Foundation, who teaches a class in Professional Ethics at The College at Brockport. They are intended for discussion and information purposes only and are not a substitute for professional legal advice. (c) 2009 RABEF Permission to reproduce is granted.