

Are diversity trainings useful?

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Abstract. In times of demographic change and globalization, workforces are becoming more and more diverse. Diversity trainings are a promising strategy to deal with demographic challenges. So far, results of studies reported inconsistent findings on the effectiveness of diversity trainings. Thus, the question arises how to best design and implement diversity trainings. We give an overview on the current literature and report experiences from two studies evaluating age diversity training, providing recommendations for designing diversity trainings.

Keywords. Diversity training, diversity management, demographic change, age diversity, training evaluation.

1. Diversity and diversity management

In times of demographic change and globalization workforces are becoming more and more diverse (van Knippenberg & Schippers 2007, Wegge & Schmidt 2015). In order to use the potential of diverse workforces, organizations invest in diversity management. A survey among 708 organizations of the private sector revealed that 40% of the organizations offer diversity trainings (Kalev et al. 2006). Thus, diversity trainings are an important cornerstone. However, research on the effectiveness of diversity trainings is inconsistent. Therefore, the aim of our paper is to provide an overview on diversity trainings and their effectiveness. Next, we present our experiences from two studies with age diversity trainings and summarize recommendations for designing effective diversity trainings.

1.1 Diversity and diversity management

Diversity as a group characteristic reflects the degree to which there are objective or subjective differences among members of a team (van Knippenberg & Schippers 2007). Diversity can refer to a variety of aspects, most often age, gender, or ethnicity as demographic characteristics, but also attitudes, education, or work values.

It is often assumed that diversity per se has positive effects as more diverse workforces are able to more efficiently deal with a more diverse customer base, bring a greater range of knowledge and perspectives (e.g., Kulik & Roberson 2008). This optimistic view is not entirely supported by empirical studies that show inconsistent results for diversity (Horwitz & Horwitz 2007; Joshi & Roh 2009). Based on theories of social categorization and models of information processing in teams, diversity in teams may result in either advantages (e.g., utilization of diverse knowledge and experience for problem solving) or disadvantages for teamwork (e.g., intensification of emotional conflicts; see van Knippenberg & Schippers 2007 for an overview).

Therefore, *diversity management* is essential to overcome the potential negative effects and make use of the potential of diverse teams and workforces (Wegge &

Schmidt 2015). It encompasses all activities directed towards successfully including different groups of employees – ranging from organizational strategies (e.g., vision statement, diversity committees), HR strategies (e.g., personnel selection, mentoring programs) to diversity trainings. The overall aim is to value, acknowledge, and utilize differences to use the full potential of diversity in terms of effective and innovative performance (Wegge & Schmidt 2015). Diversity trainings are a cornerstone of diversity management (Krings & Kaufmann 2015; Kulik & Roberson 2008).

1.2 Diversity trainings

Following Bezrukova, Jehn, and Spell (2012) diversity trainings are a distinct set of programs that aim at facilitating positive intergroup interactions, reducing prejudice and discrimination, and enhancing the skills, knowledge, and motivation of people to interact with diverse others. In this vein, diversity trainings differ from other trainings, as they challenge the way one views the world and deal with rather subjective issues. Since attitudes towards (different) others or diversity in general are formed before training, diversity training tends to be more emotionally and politically charged than other types of training. Thus, it is not surprising that studies show both positive (e.g., attitudes towards diversity or minorities) and negative (e.g., value-based conflicts, illusion of fairness) outcomes (Bezrukova et al. 2012; Krings & Kaufmann 2015).

Nevertheless, well-designed diversity trainings offer a chance to overcome the potential negative effects and improve collaboration in order to increase work satisfaction and performance (Bezrukova et al. 2012; Wegge & Schmidt 2015).

2. Effects of diversity trainings

The objective of most diversity trainings is for employees and leaders to learn how to work effectively with different others, which in turn may increase individual and team performance. For that, diversity trainings target either cognitive (e.g., knowledge), affective (e.g., attitudes), or behavioral (e.g., communication strategies) learning (Krings & Kaufmann 2015). In the long run, diversity trainings can also affect the demographic composition of workforces or the productivity of organizations. Evaluation of diversity trainings is mostly focusing on emotional and behavioral aspects (Alhejji et al. 2015; Kalev et al. 2006; Krings & Kaufmann 2015).

There are two main types of diversity trainings (Bezrukova et al. 2012; Kulik & Roberson 2008). First, *awareness training* aim at creating awareness among the participants for diversity overall or one specific aspect (e.g., age, intercultural) by promoting self-awareness on diversity-related topics and participants' sharing their experiences. Second, in *behavior-based or skill-based trainings* participants learn to monitor and reflect on their behaviors in order to learn and practice behaviors, e.g., to change discriminative behavior or to overcome communication barriers. Awareness trainings target cognitive and affective learning, whereas skill-based trainings focus on changing behaviors (Bezrukova et al. 2012; Krings & Kaufmann 2015). Assuming that a program is more effective when it addresses cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning, awareness and skill-based trainings are often combined (Bezrukova et al. 2012). However, in order for a diversity training to be beneficial, goals and expectations of both organizations and participants should be aligned with the type of training (Krings & Kaufmann 2015).

The narrative review by Bezrukova et al. (2012) and the metaanalysis by Kalinoski et al. (2013) revealed that diversity trainings have an overall positive effect on several outcomes. Nevertheless, they also report that the magnitude of the effect depends on several other aspects: Effects on the emotional level are smaller than on the cognitive or behavioral level. However, the impact of a diversity training on attitudinal outcomes can be increased, when the participants had more chances to interact with another, when the training is longer, and when it is conducted by the direct supervisor compared to HR specialists or diversity experts. Furthermore, the diversity training has a stronger impact on attitudinal changes when the didactical approach combines active and passive methods (see also Figure 1). Diversity trainings mainly cause short-term effects. The power of long-term effects is moderate on attitudinal learning and low for behavioral learning (Bezrukova et al. 2012). A stand-alone training has lower impact on affective learning than trainings with more than one or distributed sessions. However, for cognitive learning even short interventions are useful in terms of acquired knowledge (Krings & Kaufmann 2015).

Adding to this, other organizational factors can also influence the usefulness. A study of Sanchez and Medkik (2004) revealed that missing or wrong information on participants' selection criteria and no chance to align the own expectations towards the training content can lead to anger and, in turn, can result in unfriendly or confrontational behavior towards others. This shows the importance of information on the selection process and the alignment of organization and trainees' goals.

According to that, diversity trainings tend to have an overall positive trend. However, the studies also show limitations and recommendations on designing and implementing diversity trainings. Figure 1 provides a brief, not exhausting summary.

3. Experiences with age diversity trainings

In the light of aging and age-diverse workforces diversity trainings are considered to be one approach in dealing with demographic challenges (Krings et al. 2009; Roth et al. 2007). Thus, we carried out two intervention studies addressing age diversity in teams. We developed a training for leaders of age-diverse teams and conducted as well as evaluated this training in two different German organizations: Study 1 (Jungmann et al. under review; Wegge & Schmidt 2015) was conducted with 47 teams (209 employees and their respective leaders) in a public administration. The second study (Jungmann et al. 2015) was conducted with 90 production teams (1,600 employees and their respective leaders).

Successful diversity training should...

- ✓ be part of an organizational diversity strategy or diversity initiative
- ✓ set realistic goals and expectations, and align them with training design
- ✓ utilize and combine various methods on cognitive, affective, and behavioral level
- ✓ use a variety of instructional methods (e.g., presentations, video, simulations)
- ✓ include active methods (e.g., group work, role-plays, simulations) in combination with more passive methods (e.g., presentations, videos)
- ✓ provide chances for participants to interact with another
- ✓ have a behavioral component that provides a chance to learn and train skills next to elements of attitude change and cognitive learning
- ✓ last for at least 4 hours, preferably distributed sessions

Figure 1. Summary of recommendations for designing and implementing diversity trainings.

3.1 Designing the age diversity trainings

Before designing the age diversity trainings, we discussed the aims of the trainings. Thus, we decided on leaders being the target group as they have a direct influence on their teams by actively shaping the way their members collaborate and - even more - as leaders tend to have a high degree of age prejudices (Kluge & Krings 2008; Roth et al. 2007). Thus, the trainings aimed at increasing awareness for changes with age, challenges with an aging workforce as well as optimizing age-diverse teamwork. Furthermore, leaders were ought to learn, discuss, and implement options for handling age stereotypes, adapt an appreciative and age-differentiated leadership, facilitate a synergetic collaboration among young and old employees and design age-differentiated organization and contents of work tasks.

Therefore, we designed the training in order to elicit changes on the cognitive (e.g., know about the effects of age diversity), affective (e.g., have a more positive image of their own aging, show more positive attitudes towards age-diverse teams), and behavioral (e.g., consider age in organizing work-tasks, initiate a positive team climate) level. As the goals are thus manifold, we decided on a modular approach that combines elements of awareness and skill-based diversity trainings.

This means that on a *cognitive level* it was important to give information about age diversity and its effects on several group outcomes, the processes of aging and the truth about several age stereotypes. Leaders should not just know about age diversity effects, they should be aware about the effects of age diversity in teams, reconsider their own stereotypical views on different elderly as well as younger employees, and know the evidence that refutes age stereotypes.

Therefore on a second, *affective level*, the training focused at leaders becoming aware for diversity issues. Creating age awareness is an important method to reduce stereotypes and change mindsets towards a more favorable attitude (Roth et al. 2007). Studies show that age-related attitudes can be positively influenced by intensive information on (dis-)advantages of age diverse teamwork (see Wegge & Schmidt 2015 for more information). Especially for attitudes that are thought to be stable, this step is important to loosen the bonds towards the established attitudes.

On a third level, *behavioral changes* were addressed to develop competencies for dealing with issues of age diversity in the working context. That means, after being aware of the own stereotypes, leaders were be enabled to transfer the learned content into the working context and to react accordingly to subgroup building, intergroup bias and discrimination in their teams (Krings et al. 2009).

Furthermore, in line with the above-mentioned recommendations, the training consisted of two days with an additional session about 3 months later. We applied a variety of instructional methods that go beyond the mere transfer of knowledge and information. Instead the methodological mixture (e.g., presentation, role-play, discussion, simulation) allowed discussing and practicing critical situations. In study 2 we were also able to involve internal stakeholders (e.g. HR or health and safety) to foster a sustainable implementation of the training. In order to consider the individual circumstances of each organization, we adapted the training material accordingly.

Before we implemented the training, we conducted a pilot test in order to intensively discuss training materials, their fit and practicality for future participants in the organizational setting. For this purpose an expert team consisting of future instructors, selected leaders from the potential target group, and members of an in-house HR team were involved in a two-day workshop. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the diversity trainings, we conducted surveys among the leaders and

their teams before, 4 months after and between 12 and 18 months after the training. Additionally in study 2, we were able to assess participants' satisfaction with the training. Participants reported a high level of satisfaction with the content and 89% stated that they would recommend the training to fellow leaders. In addition, the participating leaders showed increased knowledge on all the relevant topics after the training.

3.2 Results of the age diversity trainings and lessons learnt

In both studies we were able to show the positive impact on topics covered in the training. In particular, participants reported increased attitudes towards the value of age-diverse teamwork and fewer age prejudices. In the same vein, team members of trained leaders showed higher attitudes towards the value of age-diverse teamwork and fewer age prejudices after the training. Furthermore, we were able to show effects of the training on team performance (innovative behavior) and health. These findings indicate that the leaders' attitudes changed during the intervention, which in turn improved the team members' health as well as the team climate.

In the process of designing and implementing the age diversity trainings, we followed several of the above-mentioned recommendations and, hence, were able to *avoid certain obstacles*. Adding to the aforementioned aspects, we also aligned goals of the organization and the participating leaders, particularly discussing what can be expected and what might not be realistic. We include relevant stakeholders within the organization (e.g., work council, health and safety) as experts and guest speakers in the training design, in order to entrench the topic within the organizations. We distributed the two training days across two weeks for participants to apply the learned aspects within their work teams and share their experiences in the following training sessions. For that, we applied a modular approach that also enabled us to adapt the training to the organizational needs. As a last example, as we wanted to evaluate the training appropriately, we decided on randomly assigning leaders to a training and control group. In order to avoid misunderstandings, we informed all leaders and their teams about this step (as part of the overall project information).

However, we also *encountered some challenges*. For example, we included direct leaders of the teams as participants, but it is advisable to include all hierarchies in order to ease implementation of actions when leaders and managers are informed – or even better – trained. We also noticed a rebound effect for some of our training outcomes. Despite a one-time booster session, work place coaching or supervision in the first 2-4 months after the training may promote transfer and implementation of actions and, thus, foster a long-lasting effect. We had to face organizational change that may interfere with the training and its effects. Thus, it is important to register potential influences on a regular basis to attribute effects accordingly.

In conclusion, the age diversity trainings have a sound theoretical background and address the cognitive, affective, and behavioral level. In both studies the trainings had considerable practical impact, as leaders were more aware for age-diverse teams and were enabled to learn practical tools for everyday leadership routines.

4. Discussion and implications

Diversity trainings are a widely used intervention in order to deal with the challenges of an increasingly diverse workforce. Overall, diversity trainings can

indeed have an overall positive impact on attitudes and behaviors, but certain factors in the design and implementation of diversity trainings should be considered (e.g., regarding length/ duration, instructional design, alignment of goals and expectations). Considering these recommendations on how to design and implement diversity trainings, we successfully conceptualized and evaluated two age diversity trainings. In our experience the most promising aspects are to discuss and align realistic expectations, consider learning on all levels with appropriate instructional methods, and using a modular approach when designing and implementing diversity training.

With that said, diversity trainings can be a useful and successful cornerstone of organizational diversity management that aims at raising awareness and intending behavioral changes in order to improve relations between employees and leaders and subsequently eliminate many of the potentially negative effects of diversity on group processes and outcomes// rather enhance performance/ outcomes.

5. References

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