

# Chapter 3

## The Differences Between Equal Employment Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Managing Diversity

Knowing the differences between Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), Affirmative Action (AA), and managing diversity (MD) is often cited as a major step forward in understanding what diversity really is. For many people, these three concepts are synonymous, but there are a variety of examples that illustrate how they are very different. Some employees see these terms as nothing new—simply a repackaging of Affirmative Action.

### Confusion of Terms

One of the reasons for the confusion in the terms is the way they are discussed in the media. Dr. Taylor Cox and Ruby Beale, for example, cite a *Business Week* article (1991, July 8, p. 65) that clearly illustrates the media's influence and genesis that cause some of the confusion:

“Call it affirmative action. Or minority outreach. Or perhaps you prefer ‘managing diversity,’ the newest, politically well-scrubbed name for policies aimed at bringing minorities into the mainstream through preferential hiring and promotion.”

The language featured in this article takes the term *managing diversity*, which is a more comprehensive term in that it includes all types of groups and organizational activities, and reduces it to only one dimension of difference (race) and only one organizational activity (Affirmative Action). The choice to use this language was made despite the wide range of available literature that would have revealed a much broader definition of the term used by experts in the field.

The *Business Week* article further reduces Affirmative Action—which is defined in the executive order that created it as “systematic steps to ensure that past discrimination is remedied and that further discrimination does not occur” (Werther & Davis, 1993, p. 105)—to two actions: preferential hiring and promotion of minorities. To make matters worse, if you explore the article further, it suggests that racial minorities really come down to one group: African Americans. Finally, the message that managing diversity is merely a new name for Affirmative Action is further reinforced in the *Business Week* article (1991, July 8, p. 58) with the following statement: “To get past the emotional charge carried by Affirmative Action, some employers have embraced a new catch-phrase: managing diversity.”

This type of confusion sets up a never-ending spiral of misunderstandings and barriers to effectively managing diversity. If diversity is defined as a new version of Affirmative Action, then all of the conceptual and motivational challenges that have plagued Affirmative Action will be attached to the process of managing diversity. They help fuel personal self-interest and a belief in maintaining the status quo theory that everyone has the opportunity to succeed. That personal—not situational—attribute determines a person's economic success or failure. In addition, the notion of self-interest refers to the fact that people will tend to resist actions or policies that they perceive will

reduce their personal circumstances and support those that maintain or enhance them. When people believe that the organization's environment and systems are on their own fair, there is no wonder they believe the incorrect notion that managing diversity is the same as Affirmative Action. This failed understanding of the differences between these terms creates a whole host of problems and barriers to change in organizations.

### Understanding the Differences

When organizations clearly understand the differences, they move beyond Affirmative Action-based profile improvement efforts that are focused solely on race and gender. They proceed to focus on the organizational environment and the degree to which the diversity of all groups is fully utilized, and organizational activities and systems are adjusted to build a more inclusive process directed toward performance. The goal is no longer merely satisfying legal requirements; instead, it now appropriately expands to include correcting environmental issues, improving productivity, and enhancing employee morale.

By focusing on the quality of the work environment and full utilization of diverse workforce talents to improve organizational performance, managing diversity takes a giant step beyond Affirmative Action. Its messages of respect, inclusion, and performance can help defuse the residue of confusion, resentment, and backlash that occurs in many organizations. These concerns are made worse by the sluggish U.S. economy, massive corporate downsizing, immigration concerns over the events of the September 11th terrorist attacks (where stereotypes of specific groups of people and their beliefs were challenged), the politics of division, and in some cases, poorly executed Affirmative Action programs. Managing the effects of these events and beliefs on organizational health and performance becomes critical.

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Profile improvement will always be important and a requirement to build an effective organizational environment. As a step in a larger process of managing diversity, it can now be seen as a means to develop the path toward opportunities such as innovation, opening new multicultural markets, effective teamwork, and the like. As a new management paradigm, managing diversity holds the organization accountable for creating a culture in which diversity thrives and is utilized to meet bottom-line performance objectives.

While it is easy to see how the goals of Equal Employment Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and diversity overlap, it is important to recognize how they are different. Figure 3-1 describes some of the key differences.

**Figure 3-1. Differences between EEO/AA and MD**

<b>EEO/Affirmative Action</b>	<b>Managing Diversity</b>
<b>Quantitative:</b> Focuses on demographic profile changes	<b>Quantitative and Qualitative:</b> Focuses on environmental readiness and performance improvement
<b>Government Mandated:</b> Imposed and often not welcomed	<b>Voluntary:</b> Internally driven and welcomed when properly explained and understood
<b>Remedial:</b> Focused on changing historic patterns of discrimination	<b>Strategic:</b> Focused on increasing innovation and creating a competitive advantage
<b>Reactive:</b> Problem response	<b>Proactive:</b> Opportunity-driven

*(continued)*

**Figure 3-1. Differences between EEO/AA and MD (concluded)**

<b>EEO/Affirmative Action</b>	<b>Managing Diversity</b>
<b>Beneficiaries:</b> Protected groups	<b>Beneficiaries:</b> Everyone
<b>Initial Step</b>	<b>Follow-up Step</b>
<b>Culture Change:</b> Not required	<b>Culture Change:</b> Required
<b>Implementation:</b> Compliance focused	<b>Implementation:</b> Competency, performance, and accountability focused

In many respects, managing diversity is an outgrowth of the early EEO and AA efforts to end discrimination, thus ending exclusionary behavior in organizations. It is a follow-up step that many organizations initiate after some internal profile changes have already occurred. Instead of ignoring cultural differences, managing diversity efforts encourage all members of the organization to increase their knowledge about diverse cultures to assist the organization in meeting its objectives. In addition to managing diversity, valuing diversity initiatives focus on bridging gaps and understanding among different cultural groups in an effort to create an inclusive workplace environment.

While the objectives of EEO, AA, and managing diversity are complementary, they can wind up on a collision course if the purpose of each is not made clear within the organization.

### **Workplace Diversity Self-Assessment**

Developing a comprehensive implementation plan to institutionalize diversity requires that managers as change agents

must question their own assumptions and understandings about workplace diversity and what it will take to get there. It requires commitment and accountability to the changing realities of a global marketplace, a willingness to address them, and an ability to integrate the organization's vision of future performance through the use of all diverse assets of the organization. Complete Exercise 3-1 to explore your own values, perceptions, and expectations about diversity.

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### Exercise 3-1. Self-Assessment

Examine how your values, perceptions, and expectations about diversity relate to your own behavior when you encounter people you manage who are different from yourself. Think back on your experiences over the last week and all of the individuals you encountered who were different. Or, in the week to come, complete this assessment based on your experience. Write your responses to the following six questions:

1. What was your first response or impression of this person when you first met them?

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2. Examine the specific assumptions you made about the other person.

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3. Check the reality behind your assumptions. (Were they stereotypes, prejudice, etc.?)

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4. Identify what you plan to do differently about how you manage these responses.

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5. Find commonalities and appreciate the differences between you.

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6. Develop ways to build trust.

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## References

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