Does Mandatory Diversity Training Work? A DEI Expert Reveals The Pros and Cons.



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As a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practitioner, I enjoy hosting and attending DEI trainings — or, as I like to call them, experiences — as much as the next person. Whether they touch on gender or racial equity or strategize on skills to build inclusion and belonging, there's something energizing about being a part of such pivotal conversations.

However, not everyone walks into DEI experiences as energized as I do. Some don't know why an experience is mandatory, or they wish that it wasn't. Perhaps they feel that because of their identity, they may be judged or attacked. Or they're so triggered by the topics covered in the experience, that they

wish they didn’t have to engage at all.

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While these are normal reactions to DEI experiences, I think it’s worth exploring some good reasons to make them mandatory and other reasons why it may not be such a great idea.

Pro: When people know better, they do better

One major benefit of mandatory DEI experiences is the informational aspect of them. Not everybody is well-versed in DEI, how to cultivate belonging and inclusion, or specific ways to show up as an ally for others. Until they know how to practice DEI principles, they may not know how to do better.

However difficult the topics may be, giving everyone the foundational principles of DEI can help some people understand them, use them, and think critically about how to show up better in the workplace and beyond.

Pro: DEI experiences are good for compliance

For leaders who are constantly weighing how to cultivate safety and belonging in a diverse workforce, mandatory DEI experiences can set the stage for how we should treat each other in the workplace.

For example, suppose your workplace has DEI protocols on how to be kind and respectful to LGBTQIA+ employees. In that case, all employees should have a baseline understanding of gender pronouns and basic interaction principles. An issue where an employee has crossed a line is much easier to identify and remedy when a DEI experience is mandatory, and the knowledge is shared with all parties. However, always keep in mind that

compliance shouldn’t be the only reason for hosting a DEI experience but rather a good reason, among others.

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Pro: DEI experiences set the foundation for a more diverse workforce and clientele

If you know you’ll be growing your workforce or attracting more diverse clients in the future, set your business up for success by having a mandatory DEI experience on the docket.

For example, suppose you know your business will begin to work with a more international clientele. In that case, it’s a good idea to train your employees to become more knowledgeable and competent in that particular culture. Preparing your workforce to interact with more diverse clients, fellow employees, and stakeholders can help create more fruitful and seamless interactions in the future.

Con: People can feel forced to “think” a certain way

Some people hesitate to engage in DEI experiences because they may view it as indoctrination. People come from different backgrounds, so requesting someone use a specific term or be mindful of behavior when engaging with certain groups can feel uncomfortable or forced for some people.

DEI experiences shouldn’t make everyone think the same way or make someone feel ashamed of who they are or where they come from. The goal is to build a behavioral foundation where people from different backgrounds can coexist and respect one another under certain principles and best practices. There’s a good kind of discomfort that helps participants grow in

certain situations, however, if a DEI experience begins to feel too confronting for certain groups, reconsider the agenda of that experience and try again with a new strategy or DEI practitioner.

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Con: Not all DEI practitioners operate the same

While one group may love a certain DEI practitioner, another group may be completely turned off. If you make a DEI experience mandatory and the employees don't enjoy it, it could have adverse ripple effects.

Keep in mind that mandatory experiences with a practitioner that the group didn't enjoy aren't always the best way to get the message across. Delivery and style make a difference, so before choosing a DEI practitioner, be sure to do your research on their background and style so you can decide who would be best for the employees in your company. But be wary of asking practitioners to dilute content to avoid the good kind of discomfort we discussed earlier. Sometimes, what's uncomfortable to hear is the best message a practitioner can deliver.

Con: DEI experiences aren't everyone's preferred way to learn

While some people enjoy in-person experiences, others prefer to read or watch videos instead. Consider offering mandatory DEI experiences to those who enjoy in-person sessions, but leave room for those who prefer a different method to opt out in exchange for reading some material, taking a quiz or watching a film.

As long as people are engaging with the work in their own way and absorbing critical information about what’s expected of them, it’s fine. The goal is to make sure best practices for building inclusion, belonging, and respect across differences are available to employees in whatever way they prefer.

Final thoughts

When it comes to DEI, there’s no one-size-fits-all approach. While mandatory experiences can bring people together and help them think through strategies for building community and cultivating respect across differences, others may not choose to spend their time that way or prefer to engage with the topic in another way. There’s nothing wrong with having multiple avenues for presenting DEI information — in fact, I recommend it. What’s most important is that people engage with the information and make a good-faith effort to show up kinder, more inclusive, and more respectful in the workplace and beyond.

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