



## Link&Learn™ eNewsletter

[Home](#) / [Company](#) / [News & Appearances](#) / [Link&Learn eNewsletter](#) / [Archive](#) /

### **Union-Management Diversity Partnerships and the Shop Floor by Pamela Henderson and Susan Woods**

*Originally published in the November 2003 Issue of Link & Learn.*

At the 2003 Linkage *Summit on Leading Diversity* (March 2003; Atlanta, GA), a union representative on the labor-management committee at his plant asked the following questions to a panel of distinguished diversity leaders (including Daniel P. Amos, Chairman & CEO, AFLAC Inc.; Robert E. Beauchamp, President & CEO, BMC Software; and Edie Fraser, President & Founder, Diversity Best Practices and Business Women's Network):

*What about the working man or woman **on the job**? Why is so much of the diversity discussion focused on management? How does diversity connect with the shop floor?*

These are appropriate questions for this stage in the evolution of the diversity field. It is widely acknowledged that diversity is about organizational culture change. Emphasis has been on:

- 1) Building CEO awareness supported by the business case;
- 2) Improving recruitment and retention, including diversity management skills;
- 3) Expanding vendor and customer diversity through customization; and
- 4) Developing metrics to document value and accomplishment.

Inclusion, while articulated as leveraging diversity, is largely focused on breaking the glass ceiling and ensuring diversity representation at all levels.

Although there is a growing body of research on the potential for enhanced creativity, innovation, and productivity of diversity in team decision-making, these ideas have not yet been connected to shop floor operations -- to innovations in the way the work of producing goods and services is organized. We suspect this is the challenge for union-management diversity partnerships. Fortunately, diversity and inclusion are still new and evolving in organizations. There is still room for union-management practitioners to make the connection. And this connection isn't that elusive.

#### **Workplace Changes Carry Cultural Implications**

Over the last quarter century, there has been a major paradigm shift in the approach to the way work gets done. Today the workplace is driven not only by greater workforce and customer diversity but also by the relentlessness of global competition and the need to be customer-responsive, both in speed and satisfaction. Successful competitors must operate in ways that pay equal attention to cost-effectiveness and quality in an environment where technology advances quickly and "the only constant is change." Today, new strategies affect management methods, work organization, human resource practices, and industrial relations. These conditions have led unions to work with management to develop effective shop floor responses. For a union, this translates to employment security.

New strategies emphasize innovations like high performance work organization, employee empowerment, teams, and total quality. New roles for management, supervision, unions and workers are defined. Organizations now claim "people" as an essential resource for competitive advantage.

In contrast, post-WWII era work organization devalued people and de-emphasized the contribution of labor to that of the machine. Profitability derived from capturing economies of scale that minimized fixed costs on volume production of standardized goods and services. Quality was de-emphasized. Innovation was controlled. Risk was minimized. Stability and predictability were the watchwords.

In operations, work was organized according to the principles of scientific-management. There existed "one best way" to perform each task. Work was divided between the "thinking" aspects - assigned to management, and the "doing" aspects - assigned to labor. Decision-making was top down. Adversarial conflict was an integral component of how things worked. Where the workforce was diverse, discrimination and job segregation were exploited for economic advantage and to keep workers separated. Culturally, one size was assumed to fit all. Assimilation was expected.

#### **Connecting Diversity, Work Organization, and The Shop Floor**

No doubt the descriptions above are gross generalizations of the past. Yet they serve to highlight three consequences of the new innovations in high performance work organization, employee empowerment, teams, and quality, which connect diversity with shop floor operations:

1. The new strategies work most effectively when decision-making is decentralized and shifted downward to the most appropriate level.
2. Successful operations are those that leverage the talent and insight of the workforce. The

ideas, skills and knowledge of the workforce become important.

3. Innovative operations are those which develop capability to learn from multiple perspectives.

These changes carry significant implications for building diversity awareness and developing skills for making differences work on the shop floor. Workplaces that have transitioned to new work systems are finding that these systems are built on constructive working relationships, effective communications, and information sharing (bottom-up, top-down, and lateral). To be successful, new work systems require respect and equity. People skills matter.

Consider, for example, the damage that could be done in an empowered team-based work environment if workers engaged one another with prejudiced attitudes and biased assumptions of who's capable and who's not, of who counts and who doesn't. High performance work strategy moves decision-making down to the lowest appropriate level. It also widens opportunity to act in a biased fashion. Imagine a situation with self-managed teams where team members select among applicants to fill team vacancies and are offended when a gay person bids to join their team. Imagine the implications if supervisors share information only with those they consider to be like themselves, by gender, by race, by ethnicity, by age, etc. Diversity culture change becomes an essential component for making teams and participation work. As with salaried levels, the shop floor climate should be one that welcomes and values diversity. It is every bit as important.

Union-management partnerships provide guidance and negotiate new work practices. New work systems are built on shared accountability and commitment, supported by equitable reward. Work environments that motivate workers to share their ideas, skills, and knowledge need to "drive out fear" and "build trust."

Workforce diversity raises two additional considerations - recognizing people for who they are, and creating a sense of belonging for all. In this respect, diversity expands the meaning of respect. An environment that demands assimilation and forces people to leave their cultural identity at the door compromises motivation for commitment and accountability. An environment where opportunity, access, and information are offered only to one favored group to the exclusion of others undermines respect and motivation.

Diversity expands the range of perspectives, the "diversity lenses," that can be engaged in problem solving. Gaining access to this resource, however, requires openness for learning from others who think or see things differently. Recognition that there is "more than one way" is a basic idea that underlies our understanding of diversity. It stands in clear contrast to the dominant cultural norm of assimilation that characterized exclusive interactions in post-WWII operations. It may fall to union-management partnerships to explicitly point out the diversity connection and the operational implications of inclusion.

### **Union-Management Diversity Partnerships**

When diversity reaches the shop floor in represented workplaces, the initiative is strengthened by union-management partnership. Today, unions and management are working together on diversity initiatives in auto, steel, warehousing, utilities, public sector city government, building and construction, and more. Initiatives include diversity counsels, climate surveys, awareness training, skills development, community outreach, recruitment, new employee orientation, and a variety of sponsored cultural events.

Management and unions share substantial interests in promoting diversity and inclusion. Management is concerned with improving the effectiveness of new work systems, morale, recruitment and retention. Improved working relationships across diverse groups and individuals should enhance communication and information flow. Improved people skills may reduce the costs of disruption from harassment, absenteeism, and conflict in a team environment. Greater diversity awareness may facilitate the orientation of younger employees to workplace operations and the transfer of shop floor knowledge. It may support interactions with vendors and customers.

For the union, improved operational effectiveness is linked to employment security and negotiated wage improvements. Diversity and inclusion are an aspect of a union's responsibility to represent the membership, not only in terms of respect and working conditions but also recognizing the changing needs of a diverse membership. An effective partnership engages both parties in mutual education and learning to better address these interests.

The emergence of union-management partnerships may prove a resource for diversity professionals in general by explicitly linking diversity to the shop floor and organizational effectiveness at the operational level. Our observation is that in high performance workplaces, union-management partnerships may engage diversity from a different starting point, one concerned with how to improve conditions on the shop floor and make the process of work, work better.

Inclusion is often viewed as leveraging diverse talent by ensuring representation at all levels. However if viewed from a systems perspective, the meaning expands to include all the ways an organization configures opportunity for influence, interaction, communication, information sharing and decision-making to utilize the potential of its diversity, including those who perform the work on the shop floor. Union-management partnerships, beginning from a shop floor perspective, may offer insight for this more operational perspective. In doing so, they help move diversity to a more comprehensive understanding of the next step -- inclusion.

---

The authors are interested in learning more about joint union-management diversity partnerships and the connection to the shop floor. Please share your experiences by e-mailing the authors directly: [sew13@cornell.edu](mailto:sew13@cornell.edu).

**Pamela Henderson**, PHR, is Director of Management Programs, Western Region, Buffalo, and also works with the Institute for Industry Studies and workforce diversity education. She teaches in the areas of technology and work organization, human resource management, labor relations

trends and diversity issues, and has unique expertise in utilizing interactive theatre in workplace education. She has been certified as a Professional in Human Resources (PHR) by the Society for Human Resource Management. On the Cornell faculty since 1991, Pam has developed national and local workplace education programs custom-designed for specific employers, and directed Supervisory Studies in the Western Region for a number of years. Pam has a strong interest in working with minority concerns in the workplace, and in enhancing interpersonal understanding and communication. A graduate of Purdue University with B.A. in interpersonal communications and an M.S. in Industrial Technology, Pam 's work background includes various positions in Fortune 500 manufacturing companies and experience as a workers compensation claim representative, job developer and placement specialist. She was awarded the Cornell certificate in graduate studies in ILR.

**Susan Woods** is Senior Extension Associate with the Program for Employment and Workplace Systems (PEWS), a university-based organizational change consulting unit. She provides facilitation and technical assistance services as well as workplace practitioner education and training in interest-based negotiations, workplace diversity, joint labor-management processes, high performance work systems, and organizational change. She has conducted union-management relationship facilitation and interest-based bargaining training with Rutgers University/AAUP Chapters; General Mills-Buffalo/BTCW&GM, Local 36G; Upstate Healthcare Systems Network - Veteran's Administration VISN 2/NYSNA, AFGE & SEIU, Local 200-C, Madison Paper Industries/PACE Local 36, and The City of Tonawanda Schools/SEIU & AFSCME. Much of her recent work has been with diversity, including workforce awareness dialogues for Cornell University Library Systems, the development of a train-the-trainer diversity awareness and culture change initiative for the IAFF/City of Buffalo Fire Department and UAW846/AAM - Tonawanda Forge as well as working with diversity executives at Philip Morris Companies to explore concepts of inclusion. She has a B.A. in economics from Mount Holyoke College, an M.A. in economics from Duke University, and an M.S. in labor studies from the University of Massachusetts.

###

[Terms & Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

Linkage, Inc. 16 New England Executive Park Suite 205, Burlington, MA 01803  
Phone: 781.402.5555 | Fax: 781.402.5556 | [info@linkageinc.com](mailto:info@linkageinc.com)  
Copyright 2004, Linkage, Inc. All Rights Reserved