

What's the Difference?
Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action and Diversity:
Toward an Understanding of Compliance and Culture
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A most challenging task in the red hot field of diversity management is that of understanding differences between “diversity” and equal opportunity or affirmative action. Confusions in this area create some of the biggest organizational barriers to inclusion.

All three concepts can be traced to the civil rights movement of the '50s and '60s, though a few visionary companies took voluntary steps to value diversity and improve race relations as early as the '40s. Diversity practices today are distinguished from Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) and Affirmative Action (AA) programs. The notions of compliance (EEO/AA) and culture (diversity) best capture this distinction.

Beginning with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and evolving according to subsequent federal and state legislation, EEO and AA programs are designed to prevent and/or correct discriminatory practices and historical patterns that adversely affect certain groups, particularly with regard to workforce representation¹. These programs are legally driven. They consist of systematic steps that result in quantifiable, numbers-based outcomes. They benefit protected classes—primarily men of color, women, and older and disabled workers. Written policies on specific commitments to nondiscrimination describe an organization's compliance.

Equal opportunity and affirmative action programs are necessary to ensure representation and diversity within the workplace. However, representation alone is not sufficient to create positive diversity practices and inclusive culture. Compliance without cultural change can add challenges. These challenges may appear as a “revolving door” (higher turnover among protected groups) and/or higher conflict, among other things.

In contrast, managing diversity is a voluntary, proactive process of learning and change. Effective diversity management creates an inclusive culture where all employees are treated with dignity and respect, valued for their contributions and help create a competitive advantage. Diversity management builds on the increased representation and fair employment practices of EEO and AA to create cultural evolution and change. It includes and positively impacts everyone—including white men. Diversity management is an embracing of difference that is reflected in all aspects of the way that an organization does business.

Thus, current definitions of organizational diversity include multiple dimensions: internal, external, organizational and personal². Diversity covers things we think of as being internal to who we are—like race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability and sexual orientation—which may be legally protected. It extends to external factors like marital status, parental status, education, religion and geography, which may also define our “group” or culture. It includes organizational factors like seniority, rank, department and even location, any of which might form a basis for group identification. Diversity is also those things we show the world and those things that form our “private identity”—like surviving abuse—which we may share in a less visible culture with those of similar experience.

Diversity is then best defined as variety--all of the ways we're similar and all of the ways we're different. At the same time, it is important to recognize and address the fact that not all differences are created equal. We make more assumptions about some diversity factors than others. Some have greater impact on access, opportunity and experience than others do. EEO, AA and supplier diversity programs are set up to reduce or remediate adverse impacts associated with certain diversity factors while diversity itself is the full variety of attributes, backgrounds, cultures and ideas that, in sum, become an organizational asset to be managed and valued.

¹ “Supplier diversity”, like EEO and AA, is also defined in terms of protected, disadvantaged or underrepresented groups. It is based on a legal mandate applying largely to the public sector and arising from the Small Business Act of 1953. Public Law 95-507--a 1978 revision to Section 8d of the SBA--formalized the concept of disadvantaged businesses and minority contracting requirements and goals.

² See the “Four Layer” model of diversity developed by Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe (in Managing Diversity: A Complete Desk-Reference and Planning Guide. 1998. New York: McGraw Hill.).