

# WHAT IS DIVERSITY?

By Jeanne Martinson

'Diversity' is a word that is tossed around in many areas of work and social life, and has come to mean different things to different people. To a stockbroker, it means a balanced portfolio of stocks, bonds and other investments. To a horticulturalist, it means balancing perennials, annuals, shade and sun. In the workplace, it means any **point of human difference**. How we define it personally or how the term is used in our workplace is important to consider and clarify so that discussions around the issue are based on common understanding.

Some people define Diversity as the four **employment equity** groups. These include people who are visible minorities, women in non-traditional or management roles, persons with disabilities, and aboriginal people. (*Employment equity is a term that was coined by Judge Abella in the Royal Commission on Equality in 1984. Her Commission found these four categories of Canadians were under-represented or underemployed in the workforce.*)

Diversity could likewise be defined by what is termed the protected or prohibited grounds in Canadian and provincial **Human Rights legislation**. These categories include race or colour, religion or creed, sex (including pregnancy), sexual orientation, marital status, family status, physical or mental disability, national or ethnic origin, ancestry or place of birth, age, dependence on drugs or alcohol, and source of income. (*Organizations are federally or provincially regulated and their category of regulation determines whether they fall under federal or provincial labour law and human rights legislation. There are some differences between the protected or prohibited grounds list from province to province.*)

Diversity could also be defined by provincial or federal **labour law** to include race, creed, religion, colour, sex, sexual orientation, nationality, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, family status, disability, physical size or weight – which is a slightly different list from the two above. (*These lists are different as human rights legislation covers more than employment and therefore areas such as dependence on alcohol or drugs and source of income tie more directly to possible discrimination of education, services or accommodation.*)

**So what is the right answer?** We are now beginning to see that workplace diversity can include the large **and** small ways that people are different. When it comes to diversity-based conflict, we often blame what we perceive to be the biggest difference between ourselves and others as the cause. However, sometimes the smallest difference between two people can be creating the workplace conflict. But by being aware of our own diversity, and the diversity of others, we can develop understanding and work in a reconciling way instead of one burdened down by conflict.

### **Final thoughts for consideration:**

- While diversity can be problematic and can trigger conflict, toxic work groups, low morale, harassment, misunderstandings and employee turnover, it can also be wonderful. It can create benefits for individuals and organizations when diverse perspectives are utilized to create synergy to move an organization forward.
- Many organizations have adopted a respectful workplace or harassment policy to combat the challenges of a diverse workplace. But this isn't enough to minimize diversity-based conflict or to realize the benefits of a diverse workforce. We need to shift how we perceive and work with others.
- A key to understanding each other is to see that everyone is different. Not only are people different from me, but I am different from them. This distinction is important because the more we identify ourselves as members of the dominant group, the more we see ourselves as the norm and others as 'different'. We may believe that change is needed on the part of 'others' so they can 'fit in', or in some cases, become more like 'us'. We are often not willing to think that our way of seeing the world is not always the correct one – that there can be other ways of thinking, doing and being.

**To find out more about diversity and leading diverse workplaces, see [www.martrain.org](http://www.martrain.org).**