



Phil Teece

*Manager, personnel
& industrial services*

If you like to track the rise of fashionable phrases in management, you'll have already spotted 'diversity management'. The term isn't entirely new but it received quite a boost from the long-awaited *Karpin report* on leadership and management skills. There, the need to 'capitalise on the talents of diversity' was seen as one of the five key challenges for Australian management. The report's authors found it 'impossible to ignore the depth of problems (and) the pervasive managerial shortcomings surrounding diversity issues', particularly relating to women and cultural differences.

Now, 'the challenge of diversity' is finding its way onto the human resources agenda at a great rate.

Evident as always, however, is the danger of lip service from managers who adopt only the term, rather than its substance. So Phillipa Hall's handy little booklet *Affirmative action and managing diversity*, Monograph No 8, Affirmative Action Agency ISBN 0 644 34857 7, makes very interesting reading.

Hall thinks too much emphasis on diversity management might create a loss of focus on the primary goal of achieving equal opportunity at work. She says there is confusion about the relationship between affirmative action and equal employment opportunity, on the one hand, and diversity management, on the other. And she fears diversity management is seen by many as a potential, softer, replacement for EEO and affirmative action, rather than as a complementary process for achieving the same goals. Much of the impe-

tus for this, she implies, comes from shifting primary focus away from fairness toward productivity.

For employees, this is rather like the industrial democracy/employee participation debate of a decade ago. Then, Federal Government attempts to secure genuine workforce involvement in decision-making were stymied by industry's fear of the real changes necessary to make it happen. Industry preferred the term 'employee participation', with its connotations of retained managerial control. But 'industrial democracy', replete with images of power-sharing in the what, why and how of decision-making, was fiercely rejected. Why? Well, the cynics would say participation provided a useful vehicle for window dressing, while democracy required real changes in power and relationships. And they are probably right.

So, just as lip service to employee participation often blocked real change, there are also dangers in refocussing equality programs to centre solely on efficiency or productivity. Equality and productivity are not mutually exclusive and many efficiency benefits can accrue to organisations which eliminate unfair practices. But it won't always be overtly 'productive' to remove discrimination. If organisations are encouraged to accommodate diversity only when they receive a tangible productivity dividend, some groups are certain to experience continuing disadvantage if immediate economic benefits cannot be identified. And with Australian managers so often operating on only one year plan-

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ning cycles, the long haul efficiency and equity potentialities of removing discriminatory practices will inevitably be lost.

In this regard, the problem of occupational health and safety costs provides a useful comparison. Some employers have maintained unsafe practices for years because the current-budget cost of doing so was seen as less expensive than eliminating them. Over decades, the result has been a continuation of massive costs — both direct and indirect, and for both employees and industry. If management of diversity takes a similar approach, accepting inequality may be seen as the more immediately cost-effective course. After all the years of rhetorical commitment, how disappointing it will be if the goal of workplace equality continues to prove as elusive as safety at work.

Phillipa Hall's monograph suggests this is a real risk. Once again, we can see the tendency for Australian managers continually to substitute one new concept for another, when the real need is for blending of different approaches and fusion of the new with the old. We do need to acknowledge and manage individual differences in people. But we also need to continue efforts to remove discrimination based on those differences. If in adopting new slogans, organisations concentrate on *managing* different treatment of employees based on gender, ethnicity or health status, at the cost of continued emphasis on *eliminating* discrimination, the outcome will serve neither efficiency nor equity. ■