Introduction

Whether we are at the beginning of our careers as diversity professionals, or senior level-executives, a persistent concern troubles many of us: How will we meet the challenges of today’s rapidly changing workplace and marketplace? Today’s diversity practitioners will need to develop 21st century capabilities to be effective in this transformed world. Diversity Best Practices has identified eight must-have competencies that will enable you to make the most out of your career, while also creating value for your company and constituents. This is your guidebook for acquiring these eight competencies, adding to your ability to become a complete diversity professional primed for success.

Before we can explore the competencies, let us step back to consider several of the challenges we face.

New Expectations

As a growing number of company leaders recognize the true value of diversity and inclusion, they look to us – diversity practitioners – to provide greater value, while the items on our “to do lists” continue to multiply. Our companies expect us to:

• Advance the global needs of our business and our constituencies.
• Support the recruitment of employees who have the skills, savvy, and competencies to complete tasks of rising complexity.
• Drive commerce by providing consumer insights, enhancing market penetration, and creating new marketing initiatives.
• Employ state-of-the-art metric systems to measure, delineate, and quantify our contributions to the company and prove our relevance.
• Cultivate a deeper, broader understanding of the shifting nature of diversity and inclusion.
• Create innovative programs, policies, and concepts to accommodate the increasing demands facing diversity professionals.
• Align our efforts to the strategic and tactical priorities of our organizations.

These new challenges are daunting, and our list is far from complete. However, they are surmountable as long as we acquire the new competencies that will enable our companies to flourish. Of course, we are not the only ones facing this dilemma. Whether you are in mining, marketing, or manufacturing, your industry is changing, and you have to adjust to new realities. Many industries, enterprises,
and professions are eliminating similar obstacles by identifying and developing the new competencies required to succeed in their new environment. Let us look at how one very successful organization, Google, is preparing its employees for the future.

Google has flourished, in part, by focusing on new competencies. This strategy is embodied in its Associate Product Management (APM) program, which Google’s Executive Chairman Eric E. Schmidt has called “one of our core values.”¹ Let us explore the program and determine why Google invests significant resources to enable its employees to acquire new competencies.

“Google’s Genius School”

Imagine it is the summer of 2007 and a little over a year since you graduated from college. You are part of a group of entry-level employees—all members of Google’s APM program—who are spending their one-year anniversaries visiting Google facilities in Beijing and Bangalore, Tokyo and Tel Aviv. It is a heady experience and you wonder why, after only a year on the job, the company is funding a two-week trip to Asia and the Middle East for you and other first-year “Googlers.” You also are surprised that the company has sent one of its top executives, Marissa Mayer, vice president of product search, to be your tour leader. The APM Program is Mayer’s creation, and she has nurtured you and your young colleagues since you joined the company. She decided to hire you at the end of a rigorous hiring process in which you demonstrated an unusual combination of competencies, such as “technical talent ... social finesse and business sense.”² You consider Mayer your mentor, and she has “made time in her insanely busy schedule to meet”³ and counsel you.

However, there is no mystery behind Mayer’s commitment to the APM program. It is the centerpiece of her career at Google. As she told National Public Radio’s Laura Sydell, Mayer created the program in 2002 to recruit “graduates from computer science programs that really understand not just technology but applications of it.”⁴ This “incubation system for tech rock stars”⁵ was the solution to a challenge vexing the leaders of the company, which had been founded just a few years before, in 1998: finding, hiring and developing ambitious, assertive, and independent product managers to “do what needs to be done, no matter what it is. They fill gaps.”⁶ They’re shape shifters. They can take on any role that needs to be taken, and juggle responsibilities, generous access to resources, visibility into Google’s executive team and many opportunities to grow.⁷ Eighty Industry observers say the program has been wildly successful; in fact, one dubbed it “Google’s Genius School”⁸ and its graduates “Marissa’s Marvels.”⁹ They buttress this judgment by pointing to the program’s first graduate, Brian Rakowski, who is now vice president of product management. On his first day at Google, Rakowski says, Mayer put him in charge of launching a new email product, which we know as Gmail.² He was also “a key leader of the team that built the Chrome browser.”¹⁰

The success of the program was certainly a central consideration in Yahoo’s decision to make Mayer, at age 37, its chief executive officer, president, and director in 2012. The AP identified “recruiting top talent” one of Mayer’s “top 3 challenges” facing the new CEO.¹¹ As Wired magazine’s Steven Levy’s remarked, “Yahoo’s talent pool has been reduced to puddles, as the best techies have gone elsewhere and promising newcomers have come down with colorblindness when it comes to purple. Everyone agrees that one of Marissa Mayer’s most urgent tasks at Yahoo will be hiring great managers and product people.”¹² However, the jury is still out on Mayer’s success in doing for Yahoo what she did for Google.

Google’s APM program focuses on competencies, many of which are comparable to the eight capabilities that we have identified as valuable for diversity and inclusion professionals. For example, the international tour is evidence of the goal to instill global mindedness in the members of this elite group. In an article in Business Insider, Mayer explains why this competency is so critical: “In our industry, in the digital world, it is always about designing for global. It is hard to design for global if you have not seen how people use their phones in Israel or use their laptops in China to Google.”¹³

Professional Crosscurrents

In a June 2014 interview, APM Molly Mackinlay discusses the importance of the competency that we call cross-cultural awareness. She observes, “Internationalizing Google’s products is about so much more than just translating everything into a different language. To optimize a service or feature to someone in a different country, you have to sit down with real users, push aside past ideas of user research, and figure out what they really need.”¹⁴ Mackinlay also notes that Google expects product managers to “do what needs to be done, no matter what it is. They fill gaps. They’re shape shifters. They can take on any role that needs to be taken, and juggle them in a way that makes the team work like clockwork, even if it is missing about 16 different gears.”¹⁵ Bringing all of these disparate elements into harmony requires a full measure of systemic thinking.

The ideal APM does not see his or her role as a top-down leader, but uses “peer-to-peer managing” to bring the product team together, create productive
partnerships between individual members, and ensure that the team stays in sync. Thus, Google’s APMs strive to develop the personal credibility to influence the team while simultaneously developing the strategic savvy to keep the team on course. Slate’s David Auerbach explains that the APMs manage by “sympathetically exert[ing] soft power to try to leverage their skills on a larger scale, without wrecking what [the team members] already do well.” Using “soft power” to manage a group of driven, intelligent, and successful people puts a lot of demands on the APMs, not the least of which is gaining the respect of experts from many different fields. As a Google job posting for an APM position put it, APMs have to “bridge the technical and business worlds as you design services that our customers love. You’ll work with Googlers from Engineering, Sales, Marketing, and Finance, to name just a few. You have a bias toward action and can break down complex problems into steps that drive product development at Google speed. As a Product Manager, you will be part of shaping Google’s next moonshot.”

Both a Google APM and a diversity professional have to develop the knowledge and the language of numerous disciplines. They need to understand the “lingo” in order to have informed discussion with engineers and accountants, marketers and human resources people. They have to develop intellectual and practical links between disparate departments and personalities, and they have to be able to blend conflicting interests and modes of operation. Diversity professionals, in particular, need to develop holistic HR know-how in addition to financial and business acumen and technical and social media fluency.

Eight Competencies

Both Google and Diversity Best Practices took separate paths to reach the same conclusion: the only way we can prosper in this hyper-competitive, evolving business landscape is through a systemic, inter-disciplinary approach that is led by highly qualified professionals with a unique arsenal of core competencies. But the questions remained: What were the next-generation competencies we would need to develop to meet the new challenges?

We launched an extensive effort to identify the core competencies that diversity managers will need in order to prosper. Through diligent research, intense interaction with DBP members, lengthy discussions with respected experts, and a meticulous winnowing process, we created a select group of the eight essential competencies that today’s diversity professional needs — especially in the areas of leadership, personal mastery, and technical proficiency.

Leadership Impact

From the first day of your career to the day you retire, your focus on demonstrating and fine-tuning powerful leadership skills is critical. This applies not just in managing a team, but in shaping the future of your organization, identifying key issues, anticipating future threats, and demonstrating personal credibility and integrity.

We have identified three core competencies that diversity professionals need to become impactful leaders.

Systemic Thinking

We define systemic thinking as the ability to see connections and interrelationships across disciplines, functions, organizations, people, trends, and cultures in ways that lead to insightful analysis and innovative, sustainable solutions.

Strategic Savvy

Diversity professionals who have strategic savvy are capable of insightfully identifying root causes to entrenched problems. They also develop clear, simple, targeted approaches that both explain the circumstances and pave the path toward a solution.

Influence

Influence is similar to “soft power.” It is the ability to persuade others to pursue a particular action—despite natural or hidden/inherent resistance, or even apathy. The ability to understand what motivates others and design an approach to leverage those motivators represents an essential element.

Personal Mastery

Personal Mastery refers to the ability to outgrow parochial issues, and develop a worldview that enables you to understand cultural differences, needs, and attitudes, as well as enable you to become a global citizen who has a comprehensive, insightful understanding of the world and its dynamics.

Global Mindset

Professionals with a global mindset are able to perceive events, whether financial, human resources, geopolitical, or demographic, within the context of an interrelated, global world. This entails a curiosity about activities in all corners of the world, nurtured through reading, traveling, and meeting people from different places.
Cross-cultural Competence

Cross-cultural competence goes hand-in-hand with a global mindset, but it focuses more on personal understanding of the perspectives and cultural differences of the global community. It is the ability to discern and account for one’s own and others’ worldviews and identify opportunities, make decisions, and resolve conflicts in ways that optimize cultural differences for better, longer-lasting, and more creative solutions.

Technical Proficiency

The third group of competencies refers to the particular expertise and knowledge one needs to have to relate and communicate with colleagues in other fields. If you wish to exercise influence and gain the respect of stakeholders in other fields, you need to demonstrate that you understand their issues, needs, and priorities, while being able to talk intelligently about how to combine your contrasting skills and knowledge to drive progress. We have identified three technical proficiencies that diversity professionals need to develop if they wish to make a difference.

Financial and Business Acumen

The ability to grasp the discourse of business—why it exists, its underlying principles, its enablers and threats, is absolutely vital if you want to develop and promote projects and strategies that provide financial value. Relevant skills include the ability to read financial statements and understand strategies to generate revenue, penetrate markets, and increase profit margins, as well as how an organization’s structure and processes support those strategies.

Holistic HR Know-How

Although not as closely identified with human resources as many people assume, diversity shares a number of common responsibilities and works jointly with human resources to achieve objectives benefiting the company and the workforce. Consequently, it is important to have a full and intimate knowledge of all HR disciplines, including talent management, pay, executive compensation, health, retirement, work-life benefits, compliance, policies, and ethics. Your ability to effectively partner with HR professionals at all levels will rely on your understanding and appreciation of these disciplines.

Tech & Social Media Fluency

The new communications and digital technologies offer diversity professionals many effective tools to advance diversity and inclusion objectives. At a minimum, you should have a clear understanding of the latest technology applications and be able to actively and effectively tap the latest social media and Web 2.0 strategies, technologies, tools, and trends, while also advocating for widespread use of social media while offering guidance on safe, ethical, and productive use of this technology.

Making the Most Out of the Eight Competencies and How to Use this Book

These are our eight competencies, but they mean nothing if we do not link them to the practical, day-to-day requirements of our jobs. We have developed this book with you in mind, and we have been diligent in providing practical, simple, and systematic processes to help you acquire, develop, and implement these skills and behaviors. Each of the following eight chapters focuses on one of the competencies. We have also striven to make the text relevant to all diversity professionals at all career levels.

The next eight chapters conform to the same pattern. Each one begins with a definition and full description of one of the competencies and its pertinence to diversity and inclusion. Once we have thoroughly explained the competency, we provide practical examples of how it is manifested in each of three career stages of diversity professionals:

1. Early-Career Professional/Individual Contributors
2. Mid-Career Professional/Leveraged Contributor
3. Senior-Level Executive/Leader

As you move from the general to the specific, we hope you will naturally analyze each competency in light of your personal responsibilities. We believe this dialogue will help you plan your career and gain the competencies you need to tame that massive to-do list you confront every morning. Whether you are a college graduate starting her first job, a well-regarded colleague in the midst of a successful career, or a seasoned chief diversity officer, we are convinced that you will find value in the pages that follow.

As you approach each competency, remember that this is a journey where the realization of any competency indicates the need for work toward the next advance. We end each chapter with a series of questions or conversation starters to help you continue your forward momentum. The conversation starters are designed to help you reflect on how you can enhance your personal competency and use the information to increase your understanding of the materials.

If you approach each competency mindful of the potential benefits to your company and constituencies, you will get the most out of the opportunities you
encounter, create value for the enterprise, and enhance your workplace. You will also be helping make your business successful, because, as Marissa Mayer likes to say, “Companies with the best talent win.”

**Endnotes**

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