

MINNESOTA

Business from a different perspective.

ProGroup Helps Corporations Realize Business Payoffs Through DIVERSITY

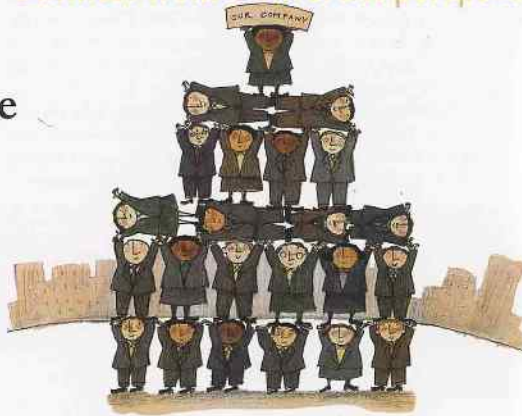
By Carol Ratelle Leach

Many potential clients who approach ProGroup, the highly respected diversity consultancy founded in Minneapolis 18 years ago, are looking for a quick fix. While a company may simply want to "get its numbers up" in an age where "diversity" can provide an edge in securing new business, Karen Stinson and Myrna Marofsky encourage a more global perspective.

"The primary goal of our work," explains Stinson, the founder and CEO, "is to help companies foster genuine appreciation and respect for employees and customers of all backgrounds, leading to more inclusive and competitive organizations." This can have a measurable effect, as demonstrated by the group's work with high-end retailers. "The reality is, your customer is no longer solely an upper-middle-class white woman," Stinson says. "If you don't go beyond that, you're going to lose money. It's a business issue with business payoffs."

ProGroup's proprietary picture exercise and tolerance scale in diversity training, which it has shared with thousands of retail managers and associates, resulted in an added \$1 million in sales within months recently for one national client, according to Marofsky, the group's president.

ProGroup's training also has internal implications for companies, from boosting retention rates to executive succession planning, particularly among women and minorities. "The fact is that you already have diversity," Stinson says. "The question is, what do you do with it? You have to leverage it as an asset; draw on it and



learn from different perspectives in your workforce that reflect the marketplace."

"Tolerance is not good enough," declares Marofsky. "Tolerance costs you money and shows no extra effort. You need to have acceptance and value people for their skills, talents, and abilities." Stinson continues, "Tolerance doesn't break any laws, but it doesn't do your corporation any favors, either. People will leave if they aren't valued. Tolerance carries an assumption of incompetence that I have experienced where I was brought into a position only because I was a woman. Lots of energy goes into acceptance."

Until recently, ProGroup worked primarily with Fortune 500 companies on the East Coast. "When we started out, there were not a lot of differences in Minnesota, so we focused our energy elsewhere," says Stinson. "Then a couple of years ago, I was walking through my neighborhood Rainbow store where people were speaking several languages and it struck me that Minnesota really needed us. We have made an effort to reconnect and refocus our efforts here."

One such effort has taken place at a manufacturing facility in St. Cloud that employs Vietnamese, Hmong, Laotian, and Hispanic workers. "They have lots of people from different cultures, some of whom have hated each other for generations," Stinson notes. "People were having fistfights. We were not attempting to change their values, but to get everyone to behave respectfully." To that end, ProGroup facilitated a series of lunch-and-learn panels in which speakers educated coworkers and managers about their cultures. Parameters of acceptable behavior were defined and communicated with the aid of a Manager's Tool Kit, which includes language instruction. "We're not about esoteric, philosophical solutions," says Marofsky. "We're very much in the trenches and we never shy away from the hard conversations."

Those hard conversations are the cornerstone for

Photo by Susan Makepeace



Myrna Marofsky, president, and Karen Stinson, CEO, of ProGroup

ProGroup's acclaimed mentoring program that has been adopted by such corporations as General Mills. "It's a two-way process for connecting that reaches to the highest levels of an organization," explains Stinson. "We match up diverse employees for a full year and give them specific content to promote the conversations that are difficult to have in corporations." An online assessment enables the organization to gauge outcomes. "It's all about return on investment," says Marofsky.

Other tools offered by ProGroup include its Honoring Differences calendar, knowledge cards, video-based workshops, self-assessments, culture kits, action packs, online training, posters, music, and gift items. The group's 25 staff members and 70 external consultants perform customized cultural audits, consulting, strategic planning, and orientations. "Every program we deliver is different because every organization is different—that's diversity," notes Stinson.

Both women say their approach has changed with time. "Back in the '60s, people would see me coming," Marofsky says. "I was a woman with a soap box. I've learned that we need to be change agents and not fighters. The message can be the same, but it needs to be delivered in a way that respects the person you're talking to and his or her different perspective. We're fighting for equality, not against 'them.' It's not about blaming. Women can be our own worst enemies at odds with each other,

and we need to bridge that by talking to other women across the lines. The key is to temper your personal passion with conversation about the business case. Start with the head and get to the heart." Adds Stinson, "Fair isn't about being equal; it's giving everyone the same opportunity to succeed." **WOM**

Written and recommended by ProGroup:

- ▶ *The Art of Diversity Training*,
by Myrna Marofsky
- ▶ *Getting Started with Mentoring: A Practical Guide to Setting Up an Inclusive Mentoring Initiative*,
by Myrna Marofsky and Ann Johnston
- ▶ *Religion in the Workplace: A Guide to Navigating the Complex Landscape*,
by Myrna Marofsky and Georgette Bennett of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding
- ▶ *Do's and Taboos Around the World for Women in Business*,
by Roger E. Axtell, Rami Griggs, Margaret Corcoran, and Mary Beth Lamb
- ▶ *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity*,
by Ella I.J. Edmondson Bell and Stella M. Mikomo