

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE

BUSINESS LEADERS, HERE'S HOW YOU START TAKING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION SERIOUSLY

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We all know it should be a priority, but how do we begin to make it one? Terri Hartwell Easter of T.H. Easter Consulting, a leading employee engagement, diversity and inclusion management, and human resources management firm based in Maryland, U.S., weighs in.

By Terri Hartwell Easter

You cannot pick up a newspaper without reading about our collective difficulty with issues of diversity and inclusion in the workplace and in society more generally. While most companies and organizations are publicly committed to diverse workforces, they seem to have trouble sustaining that commitment. So what is really going on?



Having worked with many different kinds of organizations on diversity and inclusion efforts, I have found that most of them see it as a tactic, or a box to check to meet regulatory or cultural mandates, as opposed to a strategic business imperative.

What does it mean to approach diversity and inclusion as a strategic business imperative? It means recognizing that getting diverse people in the door is not the end goal. It means that diversity and inclusion initiatives are not isolated from the larger workforce in terms of engagement and performance. And just like any other business initiative, it means that an organization must articulate their business case for diversity and inclusion.

An important first step in developing sustainable diversity and inclusion programming is to assess the current state of leadership and organizational readiness. This step is foundational and is probably the single most important factor in the success or failure of diversity and inclusion initiatives. It is only through this analysis that we can assess whether the business case for diversity and inclusion aligns with an organization's leaders' vision, interest and readiness for the change that may be necessary to achieve sustainable outcomes and results.

And it does require real change. It is not uncommon for diversity and inclusion strategic planning to go off the rails as the realization sets in that changes in behaviors, processes, and approaches, not to mention mindsets, are required for success. An organization's financial and psychological investment in the status quo should not be underestimated.

So we begin by asking hard questions, like:

- What are your organization's business imperatives for diversity & inclusion? Is there alignment among leaders (organization leadership, business unit leadership, board of directors) with the aspirations and vision for diversity and inclusion in your organization?
- What is the nature of your organization's leaders' investment in the status quo with respect to diversity and inclusion? What are the cultural connections, power dynamics, and barriers to change?
- What level of personal awareness do your organization's leaders have with respect to concepts related to privilege, bias and inequities, and the dynamics of organizational and personal change?
- How competent are your organization's leaders in the skills necessary to change the culture and nurture an inclusive workplace, including adeptness in relationship building and management, trust building, exercising influence, leading change, and managing conflict?
- How ready are your organization's leaders to acknowledge and own the organization's past failures or missed expectations for success? More importantly, how ready are they to now assume the responsibility and accountability necessary to achieve new goals for the organization's talent management, including engagement, professional development, performance management, and sponsorship as a part of a diverse and inclusive workplace?

These are not small ticket items. These questions go to the heart of an organization's culture, vision, values, and mission, which can cause considerable discomfort for some organizations and individuals. But if it is approached in a fact-based, business-minded way, it can be done without assigning any blame or shame. The goal is to have an honest dialogue – and to the degree that this is successful, it will help your leaders craft a very realistic strategic plan with appropriate goals and objectives.

Like any change effort, the process of implementing a new diversity and inclusion strategy will be slow and incremental. As anyone who has ever tried to change a lifelong habit can attest, behavioral change does not happen overnight – but it can be done. Approach it just as you would any new business initiative, use classic business process re-engineering techniques to understand where your organizational systems are working at cross-purposes with your diversity and inclusion aspirations, and use evidence-based practices to benchmark and best position your efforts for success.

Diversity and inclusion is serious business. It's time to position your business to take it seriously.

As the former Chief Operating Officer of a top 100 national Amlaw legal practice and highly regarded organizational change strategist for leading professional services firms, commercial banks and the White House alike, Terri Hartwell Easter's trademark is bringing new approaches and innovative thinking to some of the toughest human resource management challenges. With a renowned diversity practice, Terri works with clients to frame day-to-day business through a lens of inclusion to attract and retain a more diverse workforce, and create pathways to business growth.



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