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## **Sustainable Diversity and Inclusion**

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### **Overview**

Creating and maintaining a sustainable culture of diversity and inclusion remains a challenge for many organizations. Most efforts at building a diverse workforce focus on recruitment and hiring, but once diverse individuals are in the door, they often find themselves in cultures where opportunities for interesting work and promotions are granted to those with informal relationships that have been forged over time, leaving them out in the cold.

These relationships often operate outside of the normal chain of command, elevating the importance of interpersonal interactions within the context of work. As human beings, we naturally gravitate toward those who are like us. Yet it isn't difficult to see how this natural affinity may disadvantage those who are not like those in positions of power and authority. Though most organizations have a public commitment to diversity in their workforces, in practice diverse employees are frequently relegated to diversity initiatives specific to them that contribute to feelings of isolation from the greater work community.

This model for sustainable diversity and inclusion is much more expansive than the limited reach of most

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diversity initiatives. Here, the goal is to create a welcoming environment where opportunities are available to everyone, irrespective of race, ethnicity, religion, or gender, and the benefit of this approach is that it does not exclude white men. Everyone has the opportunity to benefit.

Studies have defined inclusive organizations as “characterized by effective management of people who are different, the ability to admit weakness and mistakes, heterogeneity at all levels, empowerment of people, recognition and utilization of people's skills and abilities, an environment that fosters learning and exchanging of ideas, and flexibility.”<sup>1</sup>

Others describe a learning and effectiveness paradigm in multicultural organizations that connects employees' contributions and perspectives to the principal work of the organization. This can create openings to rethink the way things are done, who the customers are, and how products are utilized, not to mention an organization's strategies, missions, business practices, and even cultures. In this type of organization, there is equal opportunity for all, differences are recognized and valued, and most importantly, the organization is able to internalize differences among employees so that it learns and grows *because of them*. Indeed, members of these organization can say “we are all on the same team [because of] our differences, not [in] spite of them.”<sup>2</sup>

Creating such an environment requires an intentional effort to identify the systems, processes, and mind sets that are obstacles to the true meritocracy we all strive for. In essence, it requires a comprehensive, well thought out diversity and inclusion (D& I) strategy. It may seem like an odd analogy, but it is not unlike helping someone conquer an addiction by methodically altering ingrained thinking and habits through a 12-step program. What follows is a 12-step strategy for sustainable diversity and inclusion.

## **The 12-Step Strategic Plan to Sustainable Diversity and Inclusion**

With this D& I sustainability approach, behavior change is not the goal. Instead, changing systems and processes creates the conditions for the behavior we want to cultivate within organizations. This approach changes the way we require people to do things, as opposed to asking them to change their behaviors on their own. While there naturally will be some resistance to systemic and process changes, healthy organizations have, or develop, a strong capacity to evolve to meet the challenges of the new workforce paradigm.

### **Step 1: Acceptance = Readiness**

Does your organization acknowledge and accept that its diversity and inclusion efforts are not achieving the desired outcomes, no matter how well-intentioned? The classic first step in any change effort is to plainly and accurately discern what is going on and to understand the drivers of the current state. A sustainable culture of diversity and inclusion is an organizational system like any other, and it must be engaged by everyone if the organization is to mature and thrive.

Once this reality is accepted, the organization's leaders must assess their own readiness to address the issue, including readiness to make the kinds of systemic and process changes that may disrupt the usual ways of doing business. This step is vital because the relative level of readiness will predict the potential for future success. If, for example, it is determined that the organization's compensation system is inherently biased, the leadership team must not only be capable of accepting that this is factually the case, but also be willing to do the very hard work of adopting a system that is truly merit-based. And that is just one example of legacy systems that may be counterproductive to a sustainable culture of diversity and inclusion.

## **Step 2: The D& I Officer Needs Help**

Those responsible for making diversity and inclusion a way of life cannot do it alone. They need the help of those in positions of power to drive change. The “higher power” needed to build sustainable diversity and inclusion in a workplace is the leadership team. Only the most senior leaders can set the vision and endorse systemic changes and processes essential for culture change. While consultants can be a vital resource, leadership of D& I efforts cannot be outsourced because outsiders simply do not have the organizational credibility necessary to achieve buy in from the workforce. Nonetheless, outside professionals are an invaluable asset in analyzing the status quo, providing feedback about what works, and identifying obstacles that are standing in the way of a culture of diversity and inclusion. Consultants also have the expertise and objectivity to provide guidance throughout the change process, maintain momentum, generate new ideas and strategies, and navigate the inevitable derailers and pushback along the way.

## **Step 3: Commitment**

Be open-minded and decisive in setting a formal diversity and inclusion strategy for your organization. Recognize that the change needed to create impactful outcomes will require the organization to think, behave, and engage in systems differently. Change is hard, and it must be championed by the leadership team. The goal is to change behaviors not head on, but through the implementation of new systems and processes that will facilitate the adoption of new ways of being. Yet as anyone who has tried to break a habit knows, it takes a huge level of commitment and mindfulness to achieve the desired outcome.

Senior leaders have the greatest responsibility during this change, because while the spirit can be strong, the flesh is frequently weak. It is difficult to maintain the dedicated focus needed for this kind of wholesale change in the face of competing business challenges as well as real, sustained, and sometimes angry pushback. Yet leaders cannot back down, even in the face of resistance from power brokers within the organization—rainmakers, partners, executives, and others. Change can feel threatening, and there will be perceptions among some that they are “losing.” It will require inner strength to stick with the strategy, as well as a comprehensive strategic communications effort to help manage the uprisings that may occur.

## **Step 4: Ground the Effort in Truth**

Be brutally honest in assessing your organization's readiness. Which operational factors (people, processes/systems, and technology) support diversity and inclusion and which impede it? Who are your champions and who will be your resisters? What aspects of your operational practices are counterproductive to sustainable diversity and inclusion? This step will necessitate an inside-out view of what is actually happening on the ground. Use both quantitative and qualitative data gathering techniques: written surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews to learn about how employees experience the workplace from a diversity and inclusion lens. Engage the organization's leaders in this honest discussion to understand whether there is a shared perspective of the organization's reality and to learn about the perhaps contradictory views of others. They must feel free to share their honest views for the effort to be an effective measure of the organization's current state

## **Step 5: Challenge Your Assumptions with Facts**

This step focuses on an outside-in view of how your organization stacks up against its peers. Use external benchmarks to understand how your organization compares in areas such as:

- diversity league tables,
- quantitative measures like “best places to work,”
- published employee engagement surveys,

- EEOC or state reports of number of complaints related to diversity and inclusion concerns,
- the number and titles of diverse senior leaders in competitors' organizations, either geographically co-located or industry-based organizations, and
- public spotlights and acknowledgements such as Best Workplace for Working Moms that are available to the organization but are missed because of lackluster D& I performance.

## **Step 6: Be Open and Engaged**

Design the D& I strategy with new pathways for building diversity and inclusion in your workplace. Be committed and ready to operate differently. Leaders must be “on board” if not in heart, then at least in their words and actions. We may not be able to change hearts and minds for others at work, but we can prescribe behavior that we feel is supportive of the organization's goals and objectives. Leaders must both embrace D& I goals and objectives and model the behaviors required to support successful D& I strategies and outcomes. If there is demonstrated leadership commitment to change, the workers will absorb that lesson over time and make it a part of their own performance. If leaders merely pay lip service, workers will quickly realize this initiative has no real support and they will not bother to adapt.

## **Step 7: Lead with Honesty and Humility**

Leaders must be honest and humble in engaging the organization in the change that will be needed. Senior leaders must publicly acknowledge what they have learned, and they must be willing to speak the truth about why diversity and inclusion programs have not worked in the past. This does not mean anyone is called out by name. Rather, it is a cleansing moment for the leaders on behalf of the organization. Admitting falling short and owning the failure smooths the path to engaging others in the collective change that must happen.

When leaders are vulnerable in this manner, it gives rank and file workers a reason to trust and to follow because they are being treated like adults and colleagues who are worthy of the truth. Ideally, this eases the realization that there will be new expectations and visions for each member of the organization to behave differently by:

- taking personal responsibility for achieving the organization's diversity and inclusion goals,
- acting proactively and decisively to address behaviors and/or systems that disserve D& I goals, and
- communicating effectively with each other on matters related to ideas, perspectives, concerns, and disagreements.

The organization must engage in healthy dialogue and perhaps even conflict to get through the discomfort and disorder that inevitably accompanies any change process. To facilitate this, the leadership team should invest in ancillary organizational development support, training, and coaching to move through the change process successfully and collectively.

## **Step 8: Acknowledge Past Wrongs**

Much like the AA program, the organization must make amends in order to start anew. This means taking responsibility for the organization's past failures. As part of this process, the organization's leaders should create a “to do” list based on the harms it has inflicted on its employees through ineffective and perhaps negligent inattention to diversity and inclusion matters over the years. For example, if women or minorities have been or are underpaid compared to similarly situated men, then the organization must commit to a plan to correct that inequity. This does not require public mea culpas, but it does require

biting the bullet, owning the shortcomings, making systemic changes, and then taking decisive action to rectify individual circumstances.

### **Step 9: Replace Harm with Care**

When making the changes identified in Step 8, it requires going deeper to understand what may have contributed to pervasive systemic inequities. These inequities frequently are the result of biases that are inherent in a system and include:

- job descriptions and associated compensation bands,
- organizational or cultural biases based upon the nature of the business or the location,
- social or business systems like informal networking practices or activities that may leave some people out, or
- investments that must be changed or managed to ensure that past problems are not re-engaged.

Organizations must consider healthy ways to build sustainable support for historically marginalized people and begin thinking about how promotional opportunities are meted out. For example, if women and minorities have been historically underpaid, think about instituting a program to provide greater professional development opportunities as a way of both making amends and initiating practices that will facilitate future professional opportunities.

### **Step 10: Monitor and Measure**

Each day presents a chance to get it right or get it wrong in the process of effecting organizational change. Leaders must set serious goals for D& I outcomes and they must hold themselves and others accountable for achieving them. This means defining a rigorous yet simple set of qualitative and quantitative measurements of progress that are monitored regularly. Measuring the number of women or people of color in the organization alone is not terribly edifying. But a healthy number of women and people of color in executive, highly visible, highly impactful, and nontraditional roles is truly meaningful. The latter number reflects the impact that new systems, processes, and programs are having on people's career trajectories, their increased influence within the organization, and the outward message to potential hires that the organization is one where women and people of color can compete and thrive. These are the qualitative differences that matter. Numbers without this richer context are meaningless.

### **Step 11: Reflection**

Leaders and managers should make it a best practice to spend time reflecting on their D& I strategy and outcomes on a semi-annual or annual basis. Are the strategies and tactics working? Does it feel authentic? Are people buying into the program and embracing the results? Are people generally feeling good about it? Are some feeling displaced? Do those who may feel displaced need support to manage their potential or perceived loss of status in light of the new organizational reality? Is there a need for course correction to ensure that near- and long-term goals will be met? The goal should not be to castigate those who are having a difficult time accepting the changes happening around them. Rather, support should be available for everyone involved, to meet them where they are and help them understand the process as part of a greater good in which they can be an integral part. Opportunities should not be finite unless that is what an individual chooses for him or herself.

### **Step 12: Celebrate D& I Successes**

When the strategy is being implemented in a sustainable and authentic way it's time to celebrate. Any organizational change is hard, and change that positively impacts diversity and inclusion is harder than

most. It is important to remember in this context that success is not defined by, nor limited to, economic gain. Rather, a new product launch that is supported by the ideas of more than one group and/or individuals who have not been previously invited to the table is a win. Keeping true to the principles of sustainability and authenticity is cause for celebration. Meeting people where they are and bringing them along to new ways of doing things with new colleagues is truly reason to cheer.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Wheeler, M. (1999, Winter). Global diversity: A culture-change perspective. *The Diversity Factor*, 31-34.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, D., & Ely, R. (1996, September-October). Making differences matter: A new paradigm for managing diversity. *Harvard Business Review*, 79-90.

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