

WORKPLACE DIVERSITY

The Search For The Golden Ticket

Workplace diversity refers to the variety of differences between people within an organization. People often equate the word “diversity” to multicultural issues. But diversity also spans differences in

age, sex, religion, personality, cognitive style, tenure, organizational function, position of power, and so on.

Decades of research has shown that a diverse workforce improves decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, innovation, and productivity. For many businesses, a commitment to diversity fills employee skill gaps and shortages, and improves employee satisfaction and retention.

Moreover, competition drives excellence; advancement is not achieved by protecting the status quo. Achieving the benefits of diversity requires more than adopting a diversity statement and hiring diverse individuals. Differences can divide instead of strengthen an organization. A crucial component of realizing diversity benefits is to create a “culture of inclusivity” that penetrates every corner of an organization. It is important to create a workplace that respects peoples’ differences and recognizes the unique contributions of individuals. When employees are truly

included, they’re more likely to share information, participate in decision-making, and build a bond.

Neuroscience studies show that our brains are hard wired to motivate us toward connection and belonging. Social needs are

managed by the same neural networks as primary survival needs such as food and water. Belonging and attachments to coworkers can be a better motivator than money.

However, impediments often thwart the realization of diversity benefits. First, a company may have “prototypes for success” that perpetuate a similarity bias and squelch diversity of thought. Second, “diverse” employees may conform to the norm and adopt

characteristics of the majority in order to fit in. Third, the “we’ve always done it this way” mentality may silence new ideas and inhibits progress. Fourth, majority group members may perceive reverse favoritism, feel left out, and disengage. Studies show

that pro-diversity messages can trigger resistance, even among those who endorse the principles of diversity. Finally, legal compliance is a

poor motivator for change. Mitigating legal risk may get people’s attention, but threats or negative incentives don’t convert mindsets.



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Tips for Realizing the Benefits of Workplace Diversity

Diversity does not have to be, nor should it be, a zero sum gain: one group wins, another group loses. Diversity, if done well, can be a win-win gain in terms of inventiveness, imagination, and profitability. Key elements for diversity success are:

- 1 Management Endorsement. Management must truly believe, and act like, workplace diversity is essential to business excellence. If top management doesn't believe it, no one else will.
 - Establish a commitment to the culture of inclusivity (not just legal compliance) by including diversity as a core value of the firm and its code of ethics.
 - Engage managers in understanding the issues and shaping solutions to reduce diversity roadblocks.
- 2 Avoid the training/bias awareness crutch. Training may be seen mistakenly as the total solution to create inclusiveness. However, changing subtle biases and building diversity skills does not transform an organization. Make sure your plan includes more than training.
 - Research indicates that diversity training programs generally do not change attitudes or behavior.
 - People are easily taught to respond correctly to a questionnaire about bias, but they soon forget the right answers. Studies also suggest that such training can activate bias or spark a backlash.
- 3 Eliminate opportunities for bias. Studies show even those committed to promoting diversity fall prey to biases. This is not about pointing fingers at bad people. Acknowledge the subtle power of biases and design processes which are free from bias opportunities, rather than expect to eliminate bias.
 - For example, in the 1970's, orchestras began using blind auditions to eliminate a bias toward male musicians. Before blind auditions, women made up about 10% of the musicians at major orchestras. Once musicians auditioned behind a curtain, women's presence in major orchestras grew to 40%.
 - Best way to eliminate bias from employment decisions: stop going with your gut. Base promotions on objective measures of performance rather than the boss' feeling about an employee.

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- 4 Rethink hiring for cultural fit. We generally look for someone with a personality that fits with a company/department/team. However, this practice works against diversity; those that "fit" may not be very diverse.
 - Big data can exacerbate this problem; the pool may be diverse in appearance, but intrinsically homogenous by hiring the same candidate profile even though from a different background.
 - Look for the quirky creator, the candidate who doesn't fit your norm, but fits the culture of diversity and inclusivity. Hire an artist into an engineering firm. Hire an engineer into a graphic design firm.
- 5 Avoid force feeding. Studies show that the approaches designed to preempt lawsuits by policing managers' thoughts and actions, can activate bias rather than stamp it out. The stronger the controls, the greater the temptation to rebel.
 - Managers do not transform into champions of inclusivity by blaming and shaming them with rules and re-education. A company can get better results by engaging managers in solving the problem, increasing contact between diverse individuals, and appealing to the desire to look good to others.
 - Strategies such as rotating management trainees through departments, mentoring programs, and self-managed teams boost inclusion while advancing other business goals.
- 6 See the whole person. We tend to reduce things to orderly dichotomies: male/female, white/black, extrovert/introvert, and so on. But reality is not that tidy.
 - No one is just male or just artistic. Each person is a whole package of interlocking attributes.
 - By showing appreciation for the whole person, you are more likely to get contributions from the whole person. Don't let roles, responsibilities and stereotypes become barriers.
- 7 Embrace conflict. Don't be surprised by conflict – expect it and reframe it. Shed the fear of saying the "wrong thing" and discuss sensitive issues. Foster an attitude of openness in your organization.
 - Tim Wolfe, former president of the University of Missouri system, did not lose his job because of racist incidents on campus. He lost his job because he didn't talk about them. While such dialogues can provoke anxiety or discomfort, they are essential.
 - Every manager should be willing to proactively ask employees to talk about how they feel diversity (or lack thereof) has influenced their experience at the company.
- 8 Share stories. As storyteller: you have an opportunity to show your own vulnerability, and share your mistakes and successes. As listener: you have an opportunity to see yourself in someone else's shoes.
 - Paul Zak, a neuro-economist, has found that hearing a story with a beginning, middle and end causes our brains to release cortisol and oxytocin. These chemicals trigger our human ability to connect, empathize and make meaning.
 - Story telling provides an opportunity for a moment of human connection, of belonging, without a formal initiative, policy change or forced diversity lesson.

9 Foster full participation. You may be missing contributions because of differing cognitive style or organization structure. Adopt practices that encourage everyone's participation.

- For example, don't miss the quiet ones. Extroverts contribute to decision-making in a disproportionate way. Introverts may formulate a recommendation too late to influence a decision, unless you solicit their contribution.
- Similarly, remote workers (out of sight, out of mind) may be excluded from decision-making because of the way conference calls are conducted, projects are assigned or work relationships are built.

So where do you start?

Every workplace is different. Certain tactics to overcome diversity challenges work better than others in certain environments. There are many paths to create a culture of inclusivity. For beliefs to change, people's experiences have to change first.

As with any cultural change, make sure to understand the unique situation of your organization as you proceed. Conduct a diversity assessment. Identify and prioritize your challenges and obstacles. Which policies need to be added or eliminated? What practices should be altered?

Positive change comes from a customized approach to diversity which is aligned with your business strategy and continuously adjusted as your organization changes. Make sure the plan is comprehensive, measurable and attainable.

Always keep in mind: diversity is useless without inclusivity.



Christina Bark, J.D.
Business advisor with an expertise in strategy, business transformation, and management. Lecturer at the School of Business at SUNY-New Paltz.



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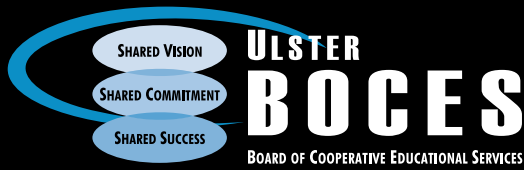


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