Corporate Diversity& Inclusiveness

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"If we wish to ensure everyone's peace and happiness we need to cultivate a healthy respect for the diversity of our peoples and cultures, founded on an understanding of this fundamental sameness of all human beings" *By Dalai Lama*

Corporate Diversity and Inclusiveness (D&I) programs are getting more advanced, utilized, and respected. Many corporate D&I programs are starting to include the importance of belonging as well. *Diversity* is something that makes us different from somebody else. *Inclusiveness* is the practice or policy of including people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized. *Belonging* is when the employee feels comfortable being who they are at work.

The organizations that use D&I only as a form of branding without any actual internal substance will lose those new employees that felt deceived after they are hired. In addition, existing employees who feel that they need to be pretend to be something there are not due to perceived issues related to their own diversity or actual open resistance or even hostility to differences in the work environment will also leave. This can have a significant and negative impact on staff retention but also the overall health of a company.

Diversity and Inclusiveness (D&I) is a complex area to manage and develop in organizations. The benefits are actual quite expansive and worth the investment. Nonetheless, there are pitfalls that can also hurt an organization when we don't understand how policy or even earnest attempts at increasing it can backfire. **More informal and formal discussions need to take place about change in general in the workplace at all levels.** In order for people to be more open minded and less resistant to change, real shifts need to happen in the culture and strategy of a corporation. Policy is never enough! Policy can be utilized as an enforcement tool, but people will always find loopholes, grey areas, or ways to hide their effort to hinder diversity within the workplace.

Why is corporate Diversity and Inclusiveness (D&I) so complex? Diversity in itself can be seen in differences in gender, race, physical appearance, physical abilities, ethnic group, thought process, age, generation group, personality, style, sexual orientation, social economic status, religion, education, etc. These issues are not limited to corporations, but we experience it in our daily lives outside of work. How we see each other and ourselves is important too. **In other words, perception is key.** Lack of familiarity and comfort around different people is common but that can be overcome. If we look at cultural research, we often find more diversity within a respective country than between different countries. Yet, we tend to see people from other countries as more different. Even within small countries, you can see a richness in diversity, if you take the time and effort to look, listen, read, and ask questions. A lot of diversity is not something we can overtly observe with our eyes. We all have some diversity and similarity when you peel back the layers. Some of our diversity and similarity maybe more prominent; thus, people by nature tend to make quick overt judgements. In order to truly know somebody and learn about their diversity in a respectful manner, it is important to have open discussions. If people feel safe and comfortable, you can get to know them. I encourage people to make this a two-way process.

What does the research show for D&I? Some research has shown that it has a direct beneficial impact on profitability when organizations increased the numbers of woman in leadership roles, as well as better mix of racial/ethnic diversity. Increased D&I can impact far more, but more studies (quantitative & qualitative) are needed within organizations that have successful outcomes to show the benefits that an array of diversity has to offer to other organizations that have yet to move forward on D&I initiatives. However, I understand that releasing detailed information by organizations can be very challenging. They would have to consider legal, privacy, and reputation issues as a result of releasing too much information. No organization is perfect and like many programs, D&I is a work in progress. Consequently, the public is left with mostly 3rd party

research across many organizations and industries that provide aggregated data and not specific to a particular outcome for a specific company's D&I initiative. That does not mean that story telling is not important as that does have impact and may help to change a person's bias or even help others not feel like they are the only one. I've heard extremely positive results from D&I programs across different organizations in a variety of industries. They invested in D&I, because their leadership believed in the intrinsic importance. I heard a fascinating benefit this week about employees who feel they need to cover up or hide who they are will use a significant amount of brain power doing it; thus, employees who are comfortable being themselves at work will be more focused. Happy employees are certainly more focused as well. People who are more comfortable are less stressed and happier as a consequence.

"We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads are equal in value no matter what their color." *By Maya Angelou*

Some unfortunate circumstances have had to occur to bring about changes in corporations. **Lawsuits based on gender and racial discrimination have cost hundreds of millions of dollars.** The changes that came as a result of the lawsuits didn't always improve the causes of the lawsuits. Programs like mandatory diversity training, candidate assessments, and grievance systems have had mixed results. When these programs are forced upon a system, people will rebel and find ways around them. Some folks that refuse to adapt and change might fall away, but the system as a whole will still suffer. The programs that are voluntary are statistically far more promising. The chances of success will be far greater when the acceptance and encouragement of diversity is made a part of the organizational culture. If minimization or prevention of lawsuits for discrimination is the primary goal, a great deal of benefits will be missed.

Diversity of thought is also very important. Why? It is increases creative thought and enhanced problem solving. Lack of it, can lead to bad decision making like "Groupthink". That sometimes occurs when a person with a very strong personality leads a group and is not open to different ideas. It can also happen to groups where the people under a leader are too afraid to voice their opinion if they don't know if it will be appreciated or not. Leaders can develop "yes-people" without even being aware of it. Genuine leaders who are open and give voice to those who support them are more likely to avoid the toxicity and negative ramifications of groupthink. Diversity of thought increases are ability to be creative and problem solve. How do we make sure that teams are communicating and working at optimal levels?

"Diversity: the art of thinking independently together." *By Malcolm Forbes*

Ageism is an ever-increasing problem in many countries and corporations. It is more easily hidden than some of the other types of discrimination; subsequently the global statistics are probably not close to being accurate. Many older people are forced into retirement earlier than they want by being fired, laid off, or downsized. It can often be quite difficult getting a new job for older job candidates. One of the most common excuses is telling older people that they are over-qualified. However, what is usually the underlying factor is fear of hiring somebody who knows more and has more experience than the person or people they will report to for fear they will take their job. Of course, retention and money are perceived issues too, but these issues rarely come up in conversation in an interview with older applicants. Some organizations have recognized this as

an important D&I initiative and have changed their talent acquisition practices to attract a larger pool of older applicants. **Some of the benefits of older workers are as follows: (1) More Engaged-Happier, (2) Highly Skilled, (3) Life Experience, (4) Absent Less, (5) High Interpersonal Skills.** Personally, I happen to enjoy working with people of all ages.

Some corporations are starting to eliminate requirements for higher education for certain positions. **That's great as I know lots of executives who do not have a college degree that are quite competent and have had amazing careers.** The reason I often hear that companies are changing the policy happens to do with a shortage of applicants, but I don't find that always statistically valid. It really depends on the company and types of positions. There are often more people graduating from college or graduate school and experienced employees than there are jobs available. In the US in particular, the unemployment rate is not accurate and the formula used to calculate it has been tinkered with for decades to show a false positive as much as possible. I believe there is a large hidden pool of potential candidates. There are a lot of woman who would like to join or re-join the workforce but are reluctant due to a lack of resources for child care and lack of flex time. There are a lot of older people who have lost their job but have given up on job searching due to ageism. There are many who could be hired for their ability rather than acquired skill, if given the appropriate training & mentoring. If a company is perceived as all white male or all young people, they will not be able to attract a wider pool of candidates. How an organization defines talent can have a big impact. Companies that have invested in D&I, onboarding, training, and mentoring have been more successful at attracting new employees. Cultural fit has become an important factor in hiring and attracting candidates. This is a complex topic that I will further address in a separate article.

Some companies are saying that a college degree doesn't equal success. I think there could be a healthy debate on what success means. Nonetheless, it is a good shift as it is an effort to stop a form of discrimination. However, we often see changes swing too far in the opposite direction. There are tons of people that were told they would advance in their organization if they got higher degrees. Those people spent a great deal of time, energy, and money getting those degrees. What if they start to be told they are "over-qualified" (i.e. cost more money)? What if people fear working with someone with higher degrees? There needs to be balance in corporate policy that impacts organizational development strategy. In efforts to become fairer to one group, it is easy to become less fair or even prejudice toward another. There is a tendency to want to over simplify these issues; thus, missing the overall impact to an organization.

These are all complicated issues but that does mean they should be ignored. **A cultural shift or full transformation can happen if the leaders genuinely believe in it, and staff at all levels support i**t. The first step is to openly talk about the issues and move those talks into action. Through positive change and forward thinking, an infusion of diversity can help avoid costly lawsuits. More importantly, it can increase productivity & profitability, retention rates, good decision making, creativity, and positive employee engagement, so that the organization can outperform and outlast their fiercest competitors. By embracing a variety of diversity, corporations will go stronger, not weaker. Business leaders will greatly benefit from building bridges not only for themselves but for their organization as a whole.

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