

DIVERSITY AND LEADERSHIP

The Journey Has Started—The Road Is Long

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Anyone who has been part of a hiring or recruitment process knows that most organizations, both in the private and public sectors, invest a lot of

time developing strategies or efforts to promote diversity. Diversity is a hot topic and has become a priority in the workforce. It is inspiring to see the progress made toward promoting and embracing diversity initiatives and it is difficult to imagine how, until relatively recently, a homogeneous workforce was not only acceptable but nearly standard. Nowadays, it is common for job applications to request a diversity statement or for employers to ask candidates how they would fit into a diverse environment, manage diversity, or build an inclusive work atmosphere.

Many businesses are steadily increasing diversity in their workforce to become more competitive. Diversity can be used to describe differences among individuals based on gender, race, ethnicity, cultural and socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, and physical ability or attributes, such as distinctive learning and communication styles or professional experience. Workers with different backgrounds generally increase productivity; diverse teams are much better at generating creative ideas and coming up with out-of-the-box approaches for problem solving. Moreover, diversity often translates into diversity of *thought*, allowing for businesses or programs to adopt new skills and attitudes, promote innovation, and quickly adapt to market changes or emerging challenges.

In our current society, cultural intolerance is generally frowned upon. It is also true that work places today are much more diverse than they were a decade ago. Does this mean that work environments are more inclusive? Are program leaders and staff members well versed in diversity? Not necessarily. Despite the progress made in equal opportunity employment and recruitment initiatives targeting broader demographics, many organizations invest resources into increasing diversity simply because it is considered “the right thing to do” and not because they see the intrinsic value in having a more diverse workforce. Worse, administrators may speak and preach diversity but, in reality, practice

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cosmetic diversity— the portrayal of a culturally diverse workforce to attract a wider clientele, serve stakeholders’ interests, or because diversity is synonymous to being politically correct.

There are many reasons companies and institutions pay lip service to diversity, but fail at building a diverse and inclusive work environment. By nature, humans feel threatened by that which is different from the norm or by situations that push them out of their comfort zone. Most people prefer to work with colleagues who think similarly; under the impression that communication is more effective and tasks can get done a lot faster. Too much diversity without the leadership skills to manage a complex group of individuals can result in negative work environments where frequent miscommunications and conflicts may not only hinder productivity, but also have the potential to spiral out of control and develop into extremely unpleasant situations.

An inclusive work environment goes beyond the recruitment and hiring process. It means that an individual’s differences and abilities are acknowledged and respected. Similar to a teacher ensuring an inclusive classroom setting, a program leader is responsible for creating a work environment that encourages participation and makes employees feel safe and valued by their organization and peers. A savvy leader will make every member of his or her organization feel empowered and the onus is on the leader to recognize, encourage, and promote the different skills and communication styles in their team. For example, if they notice that critiquing a colleague’s work in front of others makes them uncomfortable, the team leader must find an alternate means for that individual to provide their feedback, such as a private written response. In return for creating a more supportive environment, the leader, and organization as a whole, benefit from improved employee perception of their workplace—and it is no secret that happier employees are generally more productive.

A tactic to manage and embrace diversity successfully is leading by example. A leader must serve as a role model for his or her employees by supporting collaborations with colleagues with different backgrounds, professional disciplines, and welcoming a broader range of experiences and perspectives. This means that as a leader, you must first learn to recognize your own limitations, pursue new partnerships, and be willing to adapt to different personalities and work styles.

It is also critical to create a supportive work environment where everyone, regardless of social or cultural background, feels respected and valued as a team member. Encourage your staff to participate in decision-making processes and problem solving that involves the entire organization or program. If all employees feel that their opinion matters, they will be more likely to embrace and work to fulfill your goals. Furthermore, instill cultural awareness within your staff. Promote respect and appreciation for different cultures by demonstrating interest toward your employees’ backgrounds. For example, consider hosting a social event where staff brings authentic food dishes that represent their background.

Creating a diverse and inclusive work environment is a long-term commitment. The process can be messy and requires more effort than reading a few articles or attending a mandatory human resources seminar. For any team or organization, the commitment to increasing diversity leads to myriad benefits, including greater innovation, better ability to communicate with diverse stakeholders, and improved creative outputs. In the process, the leader will need to venture outside their comfort zone, explore other viewpoints with an open mind, admit to their own naiveté, and, most importantly, continually learn and adapt. While this may be a challenge, those who value the benefits of building and maintaining a diverse workforce will make this commitment and, in so doing, reap the rewards of increased collaboration and productivity that are best achieved by a culturally diverse team. ■