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The rewards—and risks—of implementing diversity and inclusion values

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Undoubtedly, we, as a society, are living in unparalleled times, with the pandemic, civil unrest, social injustices, and everything else showing up in our daily news. Among all this activity, diversity and inclusion (D&I)—the words we have heard quite often in recent years—are more important than ever, because we are in a world made up of diverse cultures shaped and shared by people with various experiences and backgrounds. But although it is not a new concept, there is no easy answer or solution for achieving it.

According to *Merriam-Webster*, diversity is defined as “the condition of having or being composed of differing elements.” In our society, people are those elements, including their race, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, and countless other aspects. Inclusion, on the other hand, is about how diversity is applied to create an equitable corporate culture or fair workplace where people are treated with dignity and respect, regardless of how they are different from the majority or whether they express different professional opinions.

Here, we will discuss how D&I can be achieved in a work culture and the benefits and obstacles that may be encountered during the development and implementation phases.

Laying the groundwork of your program

The implementation process needs to start somewhere, so build on what has been acquired to date and get management’s buy-in on D&I. Buy-in is extremely important as it helps validate and support the meaning and existence of your efforts, which can reflect and connect with the company’s values and help further solidify management’s support of the D&I mission. A vice president of a large construction company once said that a D&I program was not needed because the company was welcoming to all people. I (Daniel) pointed out to him that the painted murals in the company entryway were of only Caucasian workers and asked how he would feel if he was a person of color in this environment. He then said he understood and would update some of the murals to reflect diversity as a company value.

Another important action to help further D&I in your workplace is to foster an inclusive culture and healthy work environment where everyone feels safe, respected, and valued. An inclusive and safe environment does not mean that everyone must agree with each other; everyone’s experiences, cultures, and values are different, so it is unwise and impossible to mandate that everyone think or act in the same way. Rather, a healthy work environment is a place where everyone is allowed to speak and share their opinions on projects without the fear of feeling belittled and disregarded, or being reprimanded for making good faith comments on work-related matters. Although it can be practically impossible to put into action every opinion and suggestion, we can at least let employees know their voices are heard. The ultimate goal is to create a sense of belonging in a professional setting so everyone can enjoy their work. As an American politician once said, “We can disagree with each other without being disagreeable.” To take this one step further, employees should also be encouraged to inquire and

understand the reasons behind someone's opinion or suggestion, which can help the team think more critically and see aspects of an issue that were previously overlooked and effectively avoid misunderstandings and delays in decision-making.

This is about how people collaborate and accept the differences among them. A workplace consists of many people with many views, but accomplishing a task and doing a good job are common goals, so encourage employees to build trust and collaboration, despite all the differences they have, to achieve more and go further.

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