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.

The pros and cons of implementing D&I measures

Every coin has two sides; implementing D&I measures is no exception. With every new concept, measure, or policy, there's a new set of benefits and challenges. During a live survey we conducted during a virtual presentation at an annual healthcare conference, 81% of the attendees agreed that diversity and inclusion may create certain challenges and pressures, while 19% did not think so.

Let's examine the obstacles and benefits that your efforts may bring.

D&I measures can potentially disrupt a current workplace practice or culture; the new change may cause discomfort, resistance, or even alienation of certain employees. For instance, in a predominately young workforce, an older employee may feel all this talk about diversity and inclusion puts too much focus on their age. Likewise, people with disabilities may feel more in the spotlight without wanting to be, and people who disagree with certain diversity and inclusion efforts may feel isolated.

Along with potentially making people feel uncomfortable initially, it is not uncommon to hear comments when rolling out new measures like, "It's not who we are," and, "We have always done it this way." Additionally, well-intentioned people may prematurely implement not-yet-established changes without thinking through the process, thus resulting in hiring or promoting less qualified candidates and employees. Depending on what type of D&I program or action item you wish to initiate, it may cause a great deal of anxiety, defensiveness, and confusion, and how it is implemented can determine the success of your D&I mission. This is normal and should be expected, because when people are exposed to new perspectives and ideas—including organizational changes—uncertainty and doubt often arise.

Cancel culture can also result in a person or group labeling someone, an item, or a company as unacceptable because it differs from their point of view. If your D&I efforts get labeled in a negative way, it may be hard to proceed. If someone goes to a NASCAR race, for example, and takes pictures of themselves in front of a car representing a racially controversial company, people who viewed the photos may have—and may publicly share—their negative impressions of that person. If not handled properly, diversity and inclusion can cause or exacerbate any hostility and mistrust in the workplace that were not known or previously addressed.

But despite these few cons, the positive impacts of a strong D&I culture far outweighs the negative ones.

Because of individuals' unique experiences and backgrounds, your D&I program may cause disagreements and even arguments, but often, it broadens a team's view on subject matters. Having a diverse workforce and being inclusive allows everyone to develop, contribute, and appreciate new ideas, thus enhancing innovation and productivity. Understanding and respecting people who are different from ourselves can help prevent and potentially eliminate misunderstanding and unpleasant encounters.

Moreover, practicing diversity and inclusion can help businesses expand their customer bases and reach far more groups and people. When you have a diverse workforce consisting of younger and older employees, for example, your organization has a better idea of what that broader consumer age range prefers, which can directly affect

your business revenues and profits. In a healthcare setting, having a diverse and inclusive workforce helps eliminate a lot of negative encounters between patients and staff. Likewise, employees with different cultural backgrounds and language abilities can help bring cultural sensitivity and clear communication to the operations, both internally with cross-functional teams and externally with customers around the world.

Diversity and inclusion can also help you meet any legal and regulatory requirements, such as the objectives mandated by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In the US, companies that have a contract or a subcontract with the federal government are required to "recruit and advance qualified minorities, women, persons with disabilities, and covered veterans,"[1] which is incorporated into the companies' affirmative action plan and the implementation thereof. Through more diverse hiring practices and outreach, companies can achieve their affirmative action plan goals. Also, by diversifying the workforce and adding such elements to the mix, companies can increase the talents and skill sets of the workforce. But in order to hire the most qualified and talented candidates available, the company needs to gain access to a larger talent pool, and this starts with building strong working relationships with minority organizations and reaching out to them for potential hires. This demonstrates the company's willingness to hire qualified minority candidates, which in turn will help attract more talented individuals in the long term.

Last but not least, making efforts to further diversity and inclusion is the right thing to do. Many of us were taught by our parents and teachers that we should treat others the way we want to be treated. The end goal of diversity and inclusion is not to agree on everything; it is about understanding our colleagues and how we can acknowledge and respect them.

A cornerstone to your work culture

Ultimately, your D&I program should encourage people to stay open-minded and dissect D&I elements to help your colleagues build a positive work environment where everyone can thrive and succeed, regardless of their religious beliefs, cultural background, race, gender, age, or other characteristics. The point is not to change employees' opinions or lifestyles outside the workplace, but to have everyone get along to succeed in achieving company goals. The common goal is to accomplish business objectives effectively and efficiently while being respectful to those with whom we interact. Dignity and respect are cornerstones of any good work culture, and diversity and inclusion are an integral part.

Takeaways

- Promoting diversity and inclusion is a way to build trust and collaboration, which helps foster a healthy corporate culture that benefits employees and the company.

- Implementing diversity and inclusion in the workplace can be challenging, so employees' understanding is crucial for successful implementation.

1 "Affirmative Action," U.S. Department of Labor, accessed September 2, 2021, https://bit.ly/3DIH5lt.

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