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DEI: It's the right thing to do

By Mónica Ramírez Chimal, MBA

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, there were many inquiries about what could have been prevented. What went wrong? One of the key elements was the hiring policies of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Most recruits were very similar: white, male, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Americans.^[1] How does this affect the CIA? Their agents' mindsets were almost all the same. People with similar backgrounds and beliefs tend to have the same perspective—and same blind spots. Because of what Osama Bin Laden was wearing (a tunic) and where he was transmitting messages (a cave), the agents didn't perceive him as a threat. The threat may have been detected if the CIA at the time had someone more familiar with Islam. What Bin Laden was doing was strategic to attract more martyrs to his cause and make himself seem like a prophet.

The CIA's failure is called "homophily," defined as the tendency for people to seek out or be attracted to those similar to themselves.^[2] The reason is basic: We want to feel comfortable, and we want to trust other people, so when we gather we try to be with people similar to us. It's like validating ourselves. We don't like to be challenged or corrected.

Sadly, this didn't only happen in the CIA. It happens everywhere, in governments and companies worldwide. A more diverse group of people with different backgrounds can give better input to problems. That's why diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are so important.

What is DEI?

Diversity: Acknowledging we are all different and accepting it. Our differences could be gender, race and ethnicity, skin color, age, religion, nationality, language, sexual orientation, education, cultural background, socioeconomic status, disabilities, and diversity of thought (ideas, perspectives, and values).

Equity: Establishing justice, impartiality, and fairness for all by providing employees the same opportunities and rights. This also involves identifying and removing barriers preventing some people from having the same opportunities and rights.

Inclusion: Incorporating everyone by guaranteeing that every employee is safe, welcomed, valued, and respected; for this, discrimination and intolerance must be eradicated. Inclusion is very important because it triggers a sense of belonging. The more comfortable people feel, the more loyal they are, and the more they want to continue working for the company.

Simply put, "Diversity is where everyone is invited to the party, Equity means that everyone gets to contribute to the playlist, Inclusion means that everyone has the opportunity to dance."^[3]

The first step is to create a diverse workforce by hiring people from different cultural backgrounds. The second step is to give the workforce an equal chance to speak up without retaliation. The third step is to put into practice these principles to make the company a better place.

Keep in mind the common mistakes companies make:

- Just because the workforce comprises people from different backgrounds, nationalities, or races does not mean the company is inclusive. Inclusive means the entire workforce is valued equally and has the same chances to participate in all aspects of the company—including leadership positions and decision-making. The company may be diverse but not inclusive if only certain groups have authority or influence.
- Just because the company's headquarters is from a specific country does not mean that all board members and executive teams must be from that country. On the contrary, the composition of the company's board and executive team should represent the diversity of the geographical areas in which the company has a presence. If it does, employees and customers can easily identify with the company just by knowing that someone from their country or culture understands their needs.
- Just because there is a diverse workforce does not mean that discrimination, harassment, or stereotypes have been eradicated from the company. It is very common, even with training, that when a problem arises, people support each other instinctually if they are from the same country, gender, religion, etc. Solidarity with someone like you can create a blind spot to an unfair situation. People often put aside facts and support what they think they know, creating more problems or making the situation more discriminatory.

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