

DEMOGRAPHICS

Diversity Is Useless Without Inclusivity

by Christine M. Riordan

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Over the past decade, organizations have worked hard to create diversity within their workforce. Diversity can bring many organizational benefits, including greater customer satisfaction, better market position, successful decision-making, an enhanced ability to reach strategic goals, improved organizational outcomes, and a stronger bottom line.

However, while many organizations are better about creating diversity, many have not yet figured out how to make the environment inclusive—that is, create an atmosphere in which all people feel valued and respected and have access to the same opportunities.

That's a problem.

Minority employees want to experience the same sense of belonging that the majority does to the group. Indeed, dating back to 1890, William James noted that human beings possess a fundamental need for inclusion and belonging. Research has shown that inclusion also has the promise of many positive individual and organizational outcomes such as reduced turnover, greater altruism, and team engagement. When employees are truly being included within a work environment, they're more likely to share information, and participate in decision-making.

There are many reasons that inclusion has proved so difficult for most organizations to achieve. Broadly, they tend to stem from strong social norms and the failure to gain support among dominant group members. To understand these issues better, it is useful to look at four dynamics that frequently work against inclusiveness in many organizations.

People gravitate toward people like them. We've long known that similarity makes people like and identify with each other. In organizations, leaders often hire and promote those who share their own attitudes, behaviors, and traits. Thus, many organizations unknowingly have "prototypes for success" that perpetuate a similarity bias and limit the pool of potential candidates for positions, important assignments, and promotions.

To counteract this natural tendency, leaders must focus on the systems in place, look at basic statistics, and ask deeper questions, such as: Who is getting hired? Who is getting promoted at the highest rate? Why don't we have more diversity in various positions or on teams? Who has access to information and who doesn't? Who is not being included in these decisions? Whose opinions have I sought and whose have I left out? Am I building relationships with people who are different from me?

Subtle biases persist and lead to exclusion. When minority-group employees are hired, they may experience more subtle forms of discrimination such as being excluded from important conversations, participation in a supervisor's or peer's in-group of decision-makers and advisers, and may be judged more harshly. I recently completed a study, for example, demonstrating that individuals who were racially different from their supervisors perceived differential treatment in the forms of discrimination, less supervisor support, and lower relationship quality. The findings also suggested that dissimilarity might lead supervisors to favor people who are similar (in terms of race, gender, etc.) and demonstrate bias against people who are different. Researchers refer to this phenomenon as "subtle bias," which is often a result of unconscious mindsets and stereotypes about people who are different from oneself.

To neutralize exclusion, leaders need to proactively review the access of all groups of employees to training, professional development, networks, important committees, nominations for honors, and other opportunities. Often, employees who differ from the group in power must satisfy higher standards of performance, have less access to important social networks, and have fewer professional opportunities. A recent Monster poll showed that eight out of ten female respondents “believe that women need to prove they have superior skills and experience to compete with men when applying for jobs.” Leaders may need to invest in training to reduce the subtle biases of the workplace.

Out-group employees sometimes try to conform. Often as a coping strategy, those who are different from the majority will downplay their differences and even adopt characteristics of the majority in order to fit in. Female attorneys, for example, might adopt masculine behaviors to foster others’ perceptions of them as successful. But when unique employees move towards the norms of the homogeneous majority, that negates the positive impact of having diversity within the group.

To reduce conformity, leaders need to talk authentically about the issues, seek out, and encourage differences. Leaders should ask important questions such as “What is it like being the only African-American executive?” or “What has your experience been as a female executive?” “How can we leverage your unique perspective more effectively?” While the key is asking the right questions, it is also important to listen to the responses and not react negatively if the leader does not like what he or she hears.

Employees from the majority group put up resistance. Majority employees often feel excluded from diversity initiatives and perceive reverse favoritism. Many companies have experienced backlash when leaders don’t engage majority members in the conversation on diversity and inclusion, explain why change is necessary, and make everyone accountable.

PwC chairman and CEO Robert Morwitz has said that diversity and inclusiveness are major priorities for him personally. Morwitz prefers to serve as a role model and lead from the front. He pushes to have a diverse team on all major issues. Further, he believes that critical

thinking comes from inclusion, that is, from the diversity of perspective. Leaders need to put inclusion—not just diversity—at the top of their agendas and mean it. They need to actively talk about its importance, notice when it is present and absent, and set the agenda for the organization.



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Diversity should never be a tick-a-box set of processes and policy decisions. We feel the real benefits of diversity whenever we bring together teams with diverse experiences, perspectives, opinions, and ways of thinking and relating, to do the challenging work of collaborative problem solving.

But to reap those benefits, as you pointed out, you also need to build a culture of inclusivity that allows diversity to exist and fights the social and procedural pressures to conform. Otherwise, you'll miss opportunities to innovate and leave your organization open to stagnation and the risks of Group Think.

Excellent post, Christine!

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