

Creating a United Front: Strengthening your organization through diversity and inclusion

Though we share lots of similarities and needs, human beings are truly unique, one-of-a kind individuals. While this has always been the case, globalization, an increase in immigration, the sexual revolution and the 'outing' of formerly 'closed' subjects—like living with a disability or a person's gender preference—has put diversity and the need for acceptance of differences front and centre.

In the workplace, diversity can mean the obvious: differences in race, gender, ethnic group, age, etc., as well as more subtle disparities: the way we think and solve problems, or even people's economic or educational background. Getting along in the workplace with such a range of experiences and approaches isn't always easy. But it doesn't have to be that hard either. By understanding the challenges of difference and learning to accept varying viewpoints from your diverse workgroup, you'll not only gain a broader perspective of your world, but can build on the strengths a diverse team can bring to the table.

Why be Inclusive?

As globalization becomes a daily reality and workforces become increasingly diverse, an organization's success will depend more and more on the ability to see diversity in the workplace as an opportunity to be capitalized on.

Our society is changing: the Anglo 'majority' is shrinking; the nuclear family is no longer the most common household structure; and our population is aging. Successful organizations recognize that the employment landscape is shifting and know that fostering a welcoming atmosphere for all kinds of employees helps them to:

- **Recruit the best and brightest.** While your workforce is likely to represent a spectrum of backgrounds, one thing all managers share is the desire to attract the most talented workers possible. An inclusive, positive environment is something most people long for and value when making a decision about where to work.
- **Retain valuable team members.** People who feel isolated or unaccepted don't stick around and will probably be keeping one eye on the door. Progressive organizations know that high turnover rates can impact the company in many ways—financially and in terms of knowledge and overall morale.
- **Boost the bottom line.** As your workforce diversifies, so too has your client-base. By tapping into the range of experience your diverse workforce brings to the table, you'll help ensure you not only meet clients' unique needs but also provide them with fresh solutions and more customized service—a competitive edge that can yield profitable results.

Making it Happen

Many managers are guilty of hiring workers that share the same viewpoint and values. While this may make for group harmony, it can also cause teams to stagnate because of "group think." Though it might be more challenging to bring a range of personalities together, a spectrum of perspectives can shine new light on old problems and generate innovative solutions.

Nowhere is modeling appropriate attitudes and behaviour more important than in trying to foster an inclusive workplace culture. Real workplace diversity means shifting from a top-down approach to one that uses the diverse knowledge, thinking, and talent of employees to achieve your organization's goals.

To do this, you need to:

- **Be inclusive.** Involve every employee possible in formulating and executing diversity initiatives in your workplace.
- **Be open.** Encourage employees to express their ideas and opinions and value **all** input received.
- **Break the ice.** We can all benefit by getting to know each-other better. Take turns coming up with different ways to bring your team together. Host a 'global' potluck or sponsor a float in a cultural parade. Small gestures that show you're thinking outside the status quo about members of your team and the broader spectrum of the outside world sends a welcoming and supportive message that can help foster a sense of understanding.
- **Drum up support.** Raising money for an important cause brings people together to work towards a greater, more important goal rather than individual needs and wants. Invite suggestions for different charities to put quarterly efforts towards so each employee eventually has a turn leading the team in the fundraising fun.
- **Promote diversity.** Highlight diversity in your communications materials, in the delegates you send to external events and in the appointments you make to committees and teams internally.
- **Take and offer training.** Seek out seminars and courses on leading a diverse workforce and then use the information you glean to shape your diversity policy. If the budget allows, consider a diversity workshop for your team so they can strengthen their understanding of each other, reinforce respect and learn the fine art of inclusiveness.

How Do You Get There?

While it's easy enough to say you're interested in diversity and tolerance, walking the walk takes more than good intentions, it takes action. Ensure you:

Get the right person(s) for the job. Who is going to develop, implement, monitor, and review an organization's diversity efforts? If your workplace is really going to become more diverse and tolerant, someone needs to spearhead the initiative. Whether it's you, a colleague or a committee of employees, this person/team needs to be respected within the organization, and consistently demonstrate commitment to the principles of inclusion. They also need to have the authority to lead and act on recommendations.

Make a plan. It's important to look at where you are, where you want to go, how you plan to get there, and how you'll know when you've arrived. Is increased workplace diversity an organization-defining venture or a smaller undertaking involving a few nice meals with colleagues? Defining the scope of your organization's diversity project can help you effectively plan and measure the success (or failure) of each initiative.

Put your money where your mouth is. While you may not need to break the bank, if the push is on to create an environment of inclusiveness, you'll probably need to make a financial investment (and/or staff time or other key resources). Whether it's money for advertising your 'global' potluck or offering incentives for creative diversity initiatives, allocating a budget sends a clear message that actively supports change. Look at – and budget for – the costs of communication, assessment and employee training.

Take a 'cultural audit.' What does your organization look like today? Do employees feel the organization is inclusive? Tolerant of differences? Are people feeling uncomfortable or even harassed at work for being who they are? What ideas do people have to increase diversity in the organization? By understanding where your organization is currently in terms of inclusion, you'll be better able to set clear and concise goals about what you want to achieve.

Walk the walk. The personal commitment of leaders—including you—is crucial to the success of diversity initiatives. Attitudes toward diversity originate at the top and filter downward. Management co-operation and participation are essential in the success of your organization's plan.

Meet early, meet often. Get together to review projects and progress, get input and co-ordinate shared work processes. If team members are not getting along, take a look at mutually-owned work processes. Have team members agreed on how they will deliver a product or a service, or the steps required to get something done? Being on the same page will go a long way in ensuring the success of your diversity plan.

Celebrate. Build shared occasions into the organization's agenda and acknowledge diversity and team successes publicly—including events, awards and highlighting external recognition for your efforts.

By fostering a culture of inclusion and diversity you'll help establish your organization as a dynamic, welcoming, alive place to work. You'll also attract and retain the best people in the field. You'll be able to offer your clients a leg-up in meeting their needs and, in turn, boost your own bottom line. With the tips above as a guide, you'll be well on your way to taking your organization to the next level as a beacon of diversity and inclusion.

If you require support to deal with a sensitive employee situation, contact Shepell·fgi to find out more about the consultation and training services your Employee Assistance Program provides.

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