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PEOPLE & ORGANIZATIONS

Building Sustainable Diversity In The Workplace

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OVERVIEW

In an age of increasing technological disruption to business around the world, almost every organization is looking to ways to keep on top of innovation. A classic Forbes study found workforce diversity and inclusion to be a key driver of internal innovation, as alternative perspectives that challenge assumptions and lead to new approaches. Numerous other studies have had similar findings. Diversity has also been proven to be good for business, with a recent McKinsey study finding that gender-diverse companies are 15 percent more likely to outperform their competitors, with ethnically-diverse companies 35 percent more likely to do better.

However, simply hiring people from different backgrounds – or setting quotas for the number of women or people of different ethnic backgrounds – is not enough to benefit in itself. If your company culture ends up treating all employees in the same way, they will soon become assimilated into your existing working patterns, and the benefits of their diverse perspectives can be lost.

How to encourage the continuance of the alternative approaches that diverse teams bring – sustaining the advantages of diversity for the long term? Getting the balance right is an increasing challenge – efforts to support diversity, if implemented poorly, can seem at best patronising, and at worst insulting and discriminatory.

IN DEPTH

The world of work is changing fast. The concept of a job for life has disappeared, with employees more likely to switch jobs than ever before. Generations are shifting as Baby Boomers retire and Millennials seek rewarding work. The rise of the Internet has made the world – and our workforce – more globalized than ever. New technologies continue to disrupt and threaten further disruption to a broad range of industries. Emerging markets are growing fast, and their rising businesses could overtake previous industry-leaders from the developed world.

As the business world has become more global, so the value of workforce diversity has increasingly been recognized – a broader mixture of employees having been demonstrated to have multiple benefits in terms of productivity, innovation, and adaptability in an ever-shifting economy. But how can we maximize the advantages of a diverse workforce?

The different types of diversity

The Society for Human Resource Management, a global professional organization operating in 140 countries, notes that while most people will think of gender and ethnicity when they think of diversity, there are plenty of other traits that should be factored in. They can be split into two types – visible diversity traits and invisible diversity traits, with some falling into either category depending on the individual.

- **Visible:** Skin colour, Gender, Age, Body size/type, Physical abilities, Physical traits

- **Possibly invisible:** Ethnicity, Religion, Socio-economic status, Marital status

- **Invisible:** Sexual orientation, Native born or non-native, Nationality, Parental status, Level in organization, Education, Work background, Culture, Functional specialty, Beliefs, Values, Habits, Personality, Military experience, Geographic location

Each of these diversity traits can give their owners alternative perspectives that can be valuable for business – but some approaches to diversity and inclusiveness have sought to downplay rather than acknowledge difference.

The importance of difference

As the concept of diversity has gained traction over the last couple of decades, many companies around the world made concerted efforts to avoid discrimination and embrace the hiring and promotion of people from less traditional backgrounds. Much of the language has been around emphasizing similarities, rather than differences – trying to create harmony by encouraging employees to see what they have in common.

However, the benefits of diversity come from the very differences that this approach can seek to downplay. "As hard as getting the mix in the workforce is, most companies have gotten used to the idea that we need the mix," says Andrés Tapia, author of 'The Inclusion Paradox: The Obama Era and the Transformation of Global Diversity' (and former Chief Diversity Officer at Aon Hewitt), "but they have not been ready for making the mix work, or how difficult it is. Because the more diverse a workforce is, the more difficult it is to manage… It's not just about people looking differently, but thinking and behaving differently."

Diversity of thought

This is why we are increasingly seeing an emphasis on encouraging and accepting diversity of thought as the most important aspect of diversity initiatives, rather than the traditional focus on simply opening up the workplace to people from different genders, ethnicities and disabilities.

"Diversity is the mix, and inclusion is making the mix work," says Tapia. By adopting an inclusive approach to diversity, where cross-cultural differences as well as similarities are celebrated, the advantages of a diverse team can be sustained over the long haul.

Building trust

Of course, to encourage employees to express their different opinions presents another challenge – building the trust needed for them to feel comfortable to speak up. The key is to encourage acceptance of and respect for differences in approach – which can be incredibly complex and nuanced depending on the mix of visible and invisible diversity traits that make up your team's background.

Rewarding ideas, praising suggestions, and cross-cultural team-building exercises can all play a part, and there are too many approaches to fostering inclusiveness and acceptance of diversity to list here (see Further Reading, below, for a few overviews).

However, absolutely vital to success is ensuring that there are clear feedback channels to help shift approaches to encouraging inclusiveness of diversity if any employees feel them to be inappropriate. Because, while it's unlikely you'll ever be as excruciatingly bad as Michael Scott of The Office in his attempts to celebrate diversity, the delight of appreciating and encouraging diversity of thought is that you can be sure that you won't be able to please everyone all the time. The key is to ensure that you acknowledge and learn from this, and use any inadvertent missteps to progress. The biggest benefit of workplace diversity, after all, is in learning from and adapting to alternative viewpoints.

TALKING POINTS

"Employing people from different backgrounds and who have various skills, viewpoints and personalities will help you to spot opportunities, anticipate problems and come up with original solutions before your competitors do." – Richard Branson, Founder, Virgin Group

"Ideas from women, people of colour, LGBTs, and Generation Ys are less likely to win the endorsement they need to go forward, because 56 per cent of leaders don't value ideas they don't personally see a need for... the data strongly suggest that homogeneity stifles innovation." – Center for Talent and Innovation

"Multi-cultural teams produce different results depending on the level of inclusiveness. When a company has diverse talents but leaders ignore or suppress cultural difference, the cultural differences become obstacles to performance... When a company has diverse talents and leaders acknowledge and support cultural difference, the cultural difference becomes an asset" – Park Gyone-me, CEO, Aon Hewitt Korea

"The world is evolving at an unparalleled pace... The most successful leaders will be those who possess cross-cultural competence, a deep understanding of various peoples, and a sincere appreciation for diversity." – Donna Shalala, President, University of Miami

FURTHER READING

- How Can You Ensure That Diversity Starts at the Top? – Entrepreneur, June 10, 2015
- Diversity of Thought is the Key to Global Competitiveness – IndustryWeek, July 16, 2015
- The Importance of Diversity of Thought for Solving Wicked Problems – Forbes India, July 8, 2015
- The Business Cast for Building a Cross-Cultural Workforce – Inc., June 1, 2015
- How to Create a More Inclusive Workplace for Your Diverse Employees – Forbes, June 11, 2015
- Diversity and Inclusion: Making the Mix Work – Aon white paper