

# Redefining the Imperative for Leveraging Diversity and Inclusion: A Fresh Look

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Many organizations understand that an organizational imperative is critical to the foundation of any diversity and inclusion effort. Most corporate websites include one or more of the following reasons: to attract a talented workforce; to mirror the customers and communities served; to have diverse suppliers; to be more innovative with respect to products and services. The language of a strong imperative is there.

A problem with many organizations' stated imperatives is that they are often so broad that they give little or no real attention to the particular business conditions and needs of that specific organization. The result is a business case that may not directly relate to an organization's direction, goals, and current state—an imperative that does not inform what actions need to be taken to support leveraging diversity and inclusion. Without a relevant and meaningful organizational imperative, people do not believe there is a business need to actively and fully adhere to and support the diversity or inclusion effort. Even with a clear imperative, organizations often lack the systems, resources, and infrastructure necessary to achieve the direction and potential benefits identified by their imperative.

For example, one organization recently talked about the need for more diverse talent as part of their organizational imperative, and yet were downsizing. Framing their imperative as a need for acquiring talent, therefore, fell on hollow ears and did not carry much weight in terms of guiding implementation strategies. Although there would be a true need for greater diversity down the road, the imperative did not compel the taking of action today—it identified no "today" need, no sense of urgency. Another organization's imperative talked about how the changing marketplace was compelling the organization to reflect those same changes and yet they dealt mostly business to business and most of the people with whom they interfaced were white men.

To enable organizations to really leverage diversity and their efforts, the organizational imperative must be instructive of the core drivers for action and must clearly and directly relate to specific, current business needs.

The imperative must be developed in a rigorous manner—with the input of all the business units and functions that will need to implement the imperative. Although there are many reasons for an organization to want greater diversity, it is critical to identify the one or two key drivers that are compelling action. Failure to identify the impetus driving a need for change, results in a diffused initiative—one that is both hard to manage and lacks real accountability measures. The organizational imperative should inform the work and actions needed to achieve it like any other strategic initiative and should be clear, compelling, and strong enough that people in the organization see the direct link between organizational success and the effort.

Organizations must identify the key drivers for increasing diversity, leveraging that diversity, and creating a culture that is inclusive so that all people can do their best work. Depending on which drivers are compelling the organization to change, there will be different actions, strategies, and accountabilities that will need to be utilized. Although each driver may have some overlap, the question for organizations is: what is the main driver—the true organizational imperative—for change? The organizational imperative for leveraging diversity can be categorized into four main areas:

## 1. Talent Acquisition and Development

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The current business climate has created a paradox for many organizations—needing to perform faster, better, and stronger with fewer people on the payroll. When resources are scarce it

becomes all the more necessary to retain-and in many cases, attract-talented people.

If an organization's imperative centers on the need to retain and attract a more diverse group of people, it must be understood that this cannot be done through the same methods that have traditionally excluded them. Retaining a more diverse group of people once they join the organization requires a welcoming, inclusive environment that respects differences and supports all people in doing their best work. A focus must be on recognizing that talent does not come in one style, gender, race, or nationality. With this focus comes an imperative to rethink not only recruiting mechanisms but all other systems, structures, and policies including on-boarding, development, performance management, and succession planning. Current systems and ways of operating need to be examined and enhanced to support the success of a more diverse group of people. Managers need to expand their competencies and skills in areas such as interviewing people from a wider range of backgrounds and experiences, developing and implementing comprehensive on-boarding processes, coaching, and talent development. Also, managers must be held accountable for rates of retention, promotion, and success of their hires.

The key to successful implementation of this imperative is assuring that the people inside the organization are developed, coached, mentored, given feedback, and treated as the right people for the organization. In addition, the necessary systems, structures, culture, and competencies must be in place to assure that the organization attracts and retains new people who can effectively do their best work.

## **2. Match the Marketplace**

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Some organizations are finding that the marketplace in which they operate and the customers they serve are rapidly changing and becoming much more diverse. An organization's ability to navigate the changing marketplace, be culturally competent, and develop products and services to meet customer needs becomes more and more essential.

Matching the marketplace requires much more than efforts to "look like" the market. Bringing in one person and expecting that person to be able to adequately address the needs of a niche or major market is not a sustainable solution. Rather, all people in the organization need to develop the awareness, understanding, and competencies to serve a more diverse customer base.

This driver compels an organization to reexamine their entire approach to the marketplace-including products, services, advertising, displays, and the composition of sales teams and approach. It means integrating a new set of competencies and expectations to not only fully serve, but anticipate the needs of current and future markets.

## **3. Challenge the Status Quo**

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Some organizations are finding that what is key to their future success is the need to unfreeze the organization-to get people to start thinking and interacting differently.

If an organization identifies a need to start operating differently, they will need an organizational imperative that speaks to challenging the status quo and moving toward greater creativity, out of the box thinking, and innovation. Driving this imperative is recognition by the organization of its need to get a full range of people's ideas and perspectives, and to encourage risk taking. A need for innovation does not necessarily mean an organization needs to hire new people. What often is required is the willingness and initiative to do things differently than what

has been the tradition mode of operating, to re-structure or remove boundaries, to develop new rules of interaction, to establish new rewards, and to make sure that people's ideas will be heard and explored.

Supporting and utilizing a range of opinions, talents, life experiences, and points of view creates a deep well from which creativity and innovation can emerge. Trust, "straight talk" <sup>1</sup> (communicating clearly and directly), addressing conflicts, and taking risks are critical behaviors and competencies that must be encouraged, developed, and rewarded.

Organizations with an imperative to challenge the status quo recognize the need to create new and diverse teams where individuals can share new ideas and ways of thinking. Some organizations are measuring results by tracking innovations, the degree to which people feel free to voice their thoughts, or the creation of new ways to accomplish the work of the organization.

#### 4. Set New Standards

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Organizations that want to create new and/or breakthrough products or services have a strong need to create a high energy, high commitment, breakthrough-focused environment. Ben and Jerry's, The Body Shop, Apple Computer, and Wild Planet Toys exemplify this type of organization.

For organizations that want to lead their industry or change the world, leveraging each person's talents and abilities and creating a culture of inclusion is a necessary component to accomplish that objective. A vibrant and spirited organization where people's ideas are welcomed and their differences are respected, valued, encouraged, and leveraged is required. These organizations often become a magnet for individuals who want to change the industry or even the world- especially young people. This same environment can also reinvigorate the current workforce and their passion, energy, and dedication to the organization. Successful application of this driver means creating a breakthrough environment, and raising the bar on all aspects of its operations. This means undertaking a major culture change in which new systems, competencies, and behaviors are expected throughout the organization. For organizations that strive to set new standards, the work often entails a review and revamping of the vision, mission, and organizational strategies to assure that the vision and reach is far enough and the culture enables people to work creatively and innovatively.

#### CONCLUSION

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The challenge today for many organizations and their leaders is getting clear about which of the specific drivers are critical for implementing an effective leveraging diversity and inclusion change effort-given the organization's current state, business needs, and future directions. Only in this way can an organization successfully undertake and leverage diversity in service of the organization's mission and key strategies. This makes diversity and inclusion a means to the end of accomplishing the organization's purpose and needed results.

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#### ENDNOTES

1 Kaleel Jamison, "Straight Talk: A Norm-Changing Intervention" OD Practitioner, June 1985.

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