

Inclusion IS the Answer

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Organizations today are facing greater and greater challenges: How to make being higher performing tomorrow than you are today an on-going process? How to stay competitive in a global environment? How to deal with the fast pace of change? And, of equal importance: How to retain and attract the talent necessary to accomplish these and other organizational goals? As organizations shift from the industrial revolution model of mass production to the global revolution model of innovation and customization, what becomes evident is that every person's thinking, ideas, and experiences must be included for the organization to be a top tier performer. As many organizations struggle to find the ingredients necessary for greater competitiveness and success, one thing is clear - inclusion IS the answer!

Organizational efforts to leverage people's talents have gone through many stages. While some organizations still view people as a cost and focus their efforts on managing headcount, in others there is a major shift underway as they begin to recognize two things. They need to retain, develop, and attract talent and talent does not come in a homogeneous package. It is diverse.

Increasing representation of any population is insufficient for real organizational gain. The issue is not only having diversity (of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives) but creating an environment in which those differences are utilized and leveraged. Hiring a broader spectrum of people, then expecting them to conform to the traditional culture erases any potential competitive advantage. It is the ability to really use and see differences as an asset that begins to yield greater results. This requires more than a programmatic approach - not a few networks, mentoring, 4 or 8 hour awareness workshops, coaching programs or even better on-boarding processes, it requires a culture change. There needs to be a major shift in the way organizations do business.

Inclusion Defined

There is a great deal of confusion about what is meant by inclusion. Inclusion is not just another word for Affirmative Action or Diversity. While Affirmative Action and Diversity programs have been critical strategies to increase representation of some groups, these efforts do not go far enough. In fact, in organization after organization, our studies show that people at all levels, both genders, of all races and ethnicities often feel marginalized. Nearly everyone in organizations these days feels unappreciated, undervalued, and under fire. Small wonder, then, that resentment and backlash greet so many efforts aimed at improving the environment for just some groups. How would you feel if people from another group were given special attention while you felt no one is valuing you?

By contrast, inclusion is about everyone. In an inclusive work environment people feel more positive about their work, their co-workers, their supervisors, and themselves. Turnover rates drop. Performance, productivity, and innovation increase. For people as well as the organization, inclusion is a win-win proposition.

Inclusion does not mean anything goes or that there are no guidelines or rules. It does not mean that everyone is included in every thing. Inclusion is a sense of belonging; feeling respected, valued, and seen for who you are; feeling a level of supportive energy and commitment from others so that you can do your best work. Recently in one of our clients, where the organization was in financial struggle and had just completed a second round of downsizing, leaders recognized that retaining key talent was critical to their long- term success. While still needing to contain and cut costs, they could successfully focus on retention. Why? Because the most

powerful retention tool they had was inclusion. Creating a culture of inclusion does not need to be a costly undertaking. What it does need is a new mindset, new behaviors, and a new set of expectations for how people will be treated, rewarded and interact. For almost all organizations inclusion requires a new set of competencies. It takes a willingness to engage with people differently and to lead and manage differently.

Creating an inclusive environment assures everyone matters. In an inclusive work environment it is recognized that different people have different needs, perspectives, and talents. It is only in an inclusive environment that every person can do their best work, that every person feels that she or he can add value, and that an organization can truly leverage diversity.

Fundamental Restructuring Needed

The major change needed in most organizations is not to better enable the contributions of a few under-represented identity groups, but to create an environment in which all the organization's members can contribute in more and better ways. This requires a radical change in the way organizations go about their business, and, in fact, their very concept of doing business.

Most organizations are still operating on the command-and-control, replaceable-cog, assembly-line factory model. Since the beginning of the 20th century, this model has shaped not just our organizations but our thinking. In this model discipline and conformity are the routes to success, decision-making is best left to those at the top, differing points of view are disruptive, suggestions from below are not valued, if not mutinous, and the key to sustaining success is maintaining the status quo.

This organizational model, and this kind of thinking, simply do not engender success in the marketplace today. In a 21st century marketplace built on service, speed, and innovation, an organization's future hinges on the responsiveness and creativity of its people. Input, leadership, decision-making and constantly challenging the status quo are needed from all people at all levels of the organization. As competition increases, organizations need to engage more of their people's energies and apply those energies more and more effectively to create higher and higher value for their customers and themselves.

Engaging the whole person

In the 20th century, workers were asked to bring little more than their hands and feet to the workplace. They were expected to obey without question, keep their opinions to themselves, follow the chain of command, go by the book, and not make waves. The rule was, the work didn't need to change, and the worker didn't need to change either.

In the technology-driven workplace of today, processes must change constantly and people need to learn and grow constantly as well. So many complex skills and disciplines are involved in the workplace today that even the most routine tasks require far more collaboration than ever before. As organizations enable teams of people with wider ranges of skills and perspectives to collaborate more effectively, cross-discipline synergies lead to a faster pace of innovation.

Demanding people live-up to this broader role requires a different relationship between the organization, its managers, and its people. In hopes of engaging more of the energy and imagination of all its people, the organization cannot simply demand loyalty and obedience in return for job security; it must support individual and team development and reward

collaborative achievement. Managers must be more than attendance-takers, good technicians and disciplinarians; they must be coaches, counselors, enablers, and cheerleaders, often for people with highly specialized skills and disciplines. People must do more than perform their tasks well, they must be able to partner effectively with people who are different from themselves, with different skill-sets and technical disciplines while constantly looking for ways to improve the processes for which they are responsible.

Overcoming Fear of Change

Old ways die hard. Many people in leadership positions today grew up and achieved success in the heyday of the industrial revolution, command and control model. Some consider it too risky to change the organization, even when faced with evidence that continuing on the same path can lead only to failure. Some delay, saying that such a change in the way of doing business would take too much effort and has to wait until after whatever challenge the organization is going through at the moment. Others cite cost, unaware that the first and most important steps in creating an inclusive workplace cost no more than the moment it takes for leaders to stop and greet the people of the organization by name.

The best way to overcome this fear and resistance to change is to consider the alternatives. Maintaining the hands-and-feet status quo will lead to an inevitable demise. Taking the first steps toward creating a more inclusive workplace leads to increased productivity, profitability, and personal satisfaction.

The Role of Leadership

Changing an organization's culture to a Culture of Inclusion requires the support and involvement of senior leaders. Senior leaders must visibly and vocally demonstrate their commitment to a culture of inclusion, and they must clarify the reasons for the change in terms that make compelling business sense to every person. They must "walk their talk" in all their interactions and set the new bar for inclusion competencies.

Inclusion must start at the top but it cannot be confined there. For any change of this order to take hold, it must be championed skillfully and enthusiastically by middle managers and front line supervisors as well. These leaders must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to explain the benefits of inclusion and to demonstrate inclusive behaviors so that it becomes an integral part of the daily life of the organization.

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