

From Vision to Implementation -Instituting Your Diversity Process

By Linda Stokes

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Scenario: You've made your case for a diversity program and gained senior management support. Vision and mission statements have been published for everyone to read. Now that expectations are raised, it's time to deliver the diversity strategies, framework and tactics that will take you from vision to implementation. How can you create robust, successful and sustainable efforts? Here are 10 tips.

1. Create the strategy to frame your process.

Make sure your strategy includes three critical elements: your workforce; your workplace, and your marketplace. In addition to the three legs of your strategy, you will realize a more comprehensive, inclusive and sustainable process by including the following components of 1) increasing representation, 2) understanding, 3) managing and 4) leveraging diversity.

Most organizations spend most of their resources on increasing representation at specific levels and job categories. Unless adequate time and resources are devoted to understanding, managing and leveraging diversity, your organization will be caught in the spin cycle - without learning to understand and work together, new recruits and existing employees will be less productive.

Managing diversity involves assessing the organization's culture and systems. This component includes identifying any barriers that may prevent success as well as aspects of the culture that enhance the organization's ability to recruit, develop and retain a diverse workforce. You may decide that changes need to be made to various practices and policies, such as employee development, performance management, work/life balance, pay equity, etc., that can be identified through assessments and focus groups. Determine whether the overall culture of the organization - "the way we do things around here" - creates an atmosphere of inclusion or exclusion.

In order to successfully leverage diversity, employees should be able to contribute their talents, thoughts, skills and abilities to meet the goals and mission of the organization. When all of these elements are included, the organization can then benefit from the diverse perspectives, backgrounds and experiences that a diverse workforce provides.

2. Link and align strategies and tactics with other functional areas and specific initiatives.

Leveraging diversity must be seen as an organizational goal. If diversity is seen as "something else to do," most will never get to it and instead, the organization will be dealing with resistance brought on by the vast amount of work attributed to yet another new program. Aligning the diversity process with quality and revenue goals and activities provide sustainability and a business focus and purpose.

3. Create critical short- and long-term tactics by conducting a gap analysis, and comparing the organization's current situation to its vision for the workforce, workplace and position in the marketplace.

The gaps identified should drive tactics. This analysis does not need to take months, but can include a discussion that enables you to explore the effectiveness of the current programs and refine them as necessary.

4. Measure and track the progress you are making in closing the gaps, with reports about every six months on the effectiveness of your plan and activities.

5. Develop a comprehensive communication plan for your overall strategy.

Diversity often is the best-kept secret. Many organizations create a diversity newsletter while others include diversity-related articles in existing communications. The communication plan, however, should consist of more than well-placed articles in the newsletter. Diversity should be part of the annual report, the board of directors' meeting, "town hall" meetings, and marketing and advertising campaigns. Focus on and describe ways that diversity is helping realize the goals of an inclusive and culturally proficient workplace.

6. Develop a structure to support and implement your plan.

Depending on your organization's complexity, consider a diversity manager or chief diversity officer, an executive steering committee and diversity councils with project teams. This ensures enough resources to accomplish the tasks and keeps people at all levels involved in the process.

7. Create a job specific, comprehensive learning strategy for all employees.

While many organizations provide sensitivity or awareness seminars, all employees at every level in the organization need new skills and tools for working productively and respectfully in an increasingly diverse workplace. For example, executives need to know how to support and advocate for building a workforce and workplace that meets their vision. In order for executives to gain confidence and competence to talk publicly about diversity with various employee groups, they should be able to articulate the business case and understand their specific roles and responsibilities in supporting the process. Managers must learn to lead diverse teams, and need to be able to interview, motivate, coach, mentor, delegate and communicate across diverse employee groups.

8. Assign accountability and responsibility for meeting the vision and specific tactics to ensure success.

Without accountability and responsibility, the diversity manager will be seen as the sole person responsible for leading the effort and will be depended upon for the overall success of the initiative. Each person within the organization should have ownership and a clearly defined role in how they help meet the needs of a diverse workforce and marketplace.

9. Develop a broad definition of diversity and an inclusive tactical focus to acknowledge and engage people across all dimensions of diversity.

10. Include the WIIFM - what's in it for me - factor.

While the case for diversity is made at the corporate level, it often fails to filter down to the department and team level - the front lines. Employees need to know that diversity and inclusion will make their jobs more rewarding, less stressful, and include new ideas and skills. Managers must see the connection between the diversity process and other performance goals. And executives must know how the diversity process will assist in meeting all of the overall business objectives - including caring for customers in a culturally appropriate manner. By developing specific, measurable tactics tied to a comprehensive strategy, you will be able to create a diversity process that enables your staff to work together effectively to meet the goals of your organization.

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