

## WORKPLACE

### Make Diversity More Than a Numbers Game



Verna Myers

Many companies come to promoting and managing diversity by believing that their problems will vanish overnight if they just bolster their minority recruitment strategies. Some confuse tokenism as progress: "We have a woman in the management group now!" Still others with no diversity to speak of feel hopeless about their ability to attract a more diverse staff.

All these responses spring from the same misunderstanding: The leaders involved believe diversity is about numbers. The more you hire, the better you're doing, right? But the truth is that the goal of diversity is not to hire a particular number of a certain kind of people. The number and the kind you can attract may indicate how well your environment supports difference, but that should not be the primary focus for change.

A company's ability to foster inclusion is really about how willing its leaders are to examine and, when necessary, change the work environment — that complex human stew of organizational culture, leadership, practices, policies and procedures. The ultimate aim is to transform the organization into one that recognizes and appreciates all kinds of human differences, and sees them as assets that should be cultivated and promoted to serve the company's mission — "cultural competence."

An institution's culture is imperceptible to those for whom it works well. Those in the majority are happy fish in clear water, water they can't even

perceive. By contrast, those who have been under-represented in the culture sense it instantly, the precise taste and temperature of the particular culture's norms, language and tone — and the extent to which it does not work for or reflect them. These unwritten norms or codes can feel exclusive and even insensitive. "Everyone knows" that you don't actually ask for flex time, even though it's on the books. Companies have outings in areas of the city that might not be hospitable to certain groups. Jokes get told that don't seem offensive to those of the dominant religion or sexual orientation. Mentoring and promotion depend too much on people making connections around comfortable commonalities.

If a firm fails to see how its particular environment runs counter to its diversity goals, can it still make progress? It may make some numeric gains in hiring — but the progress won't last. For example, pulling out all the stops to bring in exceptionally talented candidates of color — without doing the necessary work of changing the culture first — can lead to a frustrating cycle of gaining and losing, expectation and disappointment, heightened activity and resignation. Often the star individuals don't stay long or don't thrive and are asked to leave. When this happens repeatedly, the worst of people's unacknowledged biases emerge and the organization begins to tell a story about how the individuals were to blame, as in, "He just wasn't the right fit" or "She wasn't as committed." Typically, there is no analysis of what the company could have done differently.

To get started on an initiative that will truly promote diversity with sustainable results, a company has to commit to a long-term process of systemic cultural change. Here are a few suggestions for making it work.

1. *Start by having a cultural assessment or audit performed.* The aim is to gather information about the

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experiences of individuals of majority and minority backgrounds within the organization (and those who have left it) to determine how the firm's environment supports or creates barriers to diversity and inclusion. A firm can gather some of this data itself through meetings, anonymous surveys, statistics and exit interviews, but it's crucial to retain an external diversity expert to gather confidential information from employees who may be understandably reluctant to discuss delicate topics candidly with their employer. Through tools like focus groups, one-on-one interviews or written surveys, the consultant will uncover the kind of specifics that point to possible action. You may learn that one department has a system for assuring that everyone has access to challenging work while another does not, or that most women end up leaving after three years, so your action questions are "why" and "what can you do about it?"

2. *Inform the organization, especially leaders and managers, of the assessment findings.* Creating a more inclusive environment involves and benefits everyone, so the assessment results should be shared and discussed in some form with everyone in the organization to help people understand what others are experiencing. In particular, leaders, managers and supervisors should openly discuss the assessment's implications for their areas.

3. *Determine priorities and develop a multi-faceted diversity action plan.* The assessment will not only identify trouble areas but also the company's strengths — those individuals and departments that are doing well, those strategies that merit further investment. Based on these findings, a diversity plan should be developed by people from a cross-section of the organization, including the company's most influential leaders. Such plans typically include education and training to increase the cultural competence of the entire staff, as well as monitoring and changing policies and systems around recruitment and hiring, orientation and

integration, feedback, training, performance evaluation, benefits, compensation systems and communication practices. Most companies also learn that they have to create some entirely new systems — systems that weren't necessary when much of its work force shared a similar background. In predominately white and male organizations, this may mean sponsoring activities for women or people of color to counter the isolation they may feel or to connect them with new clients. For some companies, it may mean creating a more formal cross-cultural mentoring system to cultivate the talent and potential of everyone in the firm, not just those most outwardly similar to the existing top brass.

4. *Be willing to align policies and practices with diversity goals.* Progress happens when a company comes to see that the only things that are sacred are its core values; everything else can (and should!) be changed if it doesn't support the organization's goals. Flowery statements about equal opportunity and diversity, lovely Web sites, impressive speakers and massive diversity training programs will not, on their own, create cultural competence. The only way to change who comes to and thrives in an institution is to change the firm's formal and informal systems for distributing opportunity and development. With the assessment as a baseline, the plan should also include ways to measure progress, and then to modify future efforts.

Becoming more diverse and inclusive requires a long-term process. It also demands a deeply brave willingness to accept that the same culture that in many ways was responsible for the company's success may now be the very thing undermining its diversity goals — and the success they in turn will bring.

It is never easy. But it is always worth it.

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