



Dos and Don'ts of Successful D&I Programs

Effective Diversity Efforts More Than Just Window Dressing

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For all the feel-good talk about the importance of workplace diversity, programs built around the lofty ideal often fail, according to a recent survey. Compounding matters is a sense of “diversity fatigue” as overly politically correct D&I programs, lacking substance, often are met with resistance or indifference.

Yet, the realities of a global economy and increased competition for talent make the embrace of diversity ever more critical for businesses, say human resources professionals. A successful diversity and inclusion (D&I) program, they stress, must start in (or at least include) the executive suite, be tied to business goals and afforded ample resources, while being made actionable through skill development and reinforced through advancement opportunities.

“It is absolutely imperative that organizations embrace diversity and inclusion in much more than just an ideological manner,” says Fred Smith, vice president of Novations Group., a Boston-based consultancy. “Organizations intellectually grasp this; but when it comes to implementing diversity into their practices and procedures, they have difficulty.”

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Of HR executives that responded to questions from Novations about the biggest flaws in their company’s D&I programs, 29% cited a lack of tools to reinforce the training, while 22% said the training fails to address development and advancement issues. So where should a company start? At the top.

A diversity program that doesn’t involve the company’s top executives is guaranteed to fail, says Andrés Tapia, chief diversity officer of HR consultancy and outsourcing firm Hewitt Associates LLC in Lincolnshire, Ill. Tapia not only oversees Hewitt’s internal D&I policies, but also implements diversity initiatives for its client companies.

“If you don’t have the C-suite commitment, then it will never work. The leadership sets the tone,” Tapia says, in a sentiment widely shared by all sources.

If a D&I initiative originates from elsewhere within the organization, then the leaders need to be educated about the importance of diversity and brought on board, says Linda Robinson, training manager with Los Angeles-based HR services outsourcing firm CPEhr. Management, she says, is the ultimate example; so the higher the level of leadership, the more effective a D&I program will be.

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LLC***

Executives who do sign on must understand that the dominant culture – perhaps a white, male, heterosexual majority – needs to be genuinely committed, Tapia says. This is especially applicable to an organization traditionally lacking in diversity, he adds, where the dominant culture may not realize how poorly one particular management style may resonate with different groups.

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Making the Business Case for Diversity

In order to make a diversity program meet with success, those in charge need to first outline the organization’s tangible objectives just as they would with any other business initiative, says Roberta Chinsky Matuson, president of Human Resource Solutions, an HR consultancy based in Northampton, Mass.

And just as a company might bring in a consultant to help launch a new marketing campaign, she says, it often makes

sense to contract with an outside diversity expert.

Tapia says organizations considering the importance of diversity should not only focus on attracting and retaining talent, but also should look outward. In other words, how does an organizational understanding of diversity help a business sell goods or services to people who are not a part of the dominant culture?

"If you do not have a good answer to that question, you'll just be selling goods and services to your traditional, dominant, white culture," Tapia says. "Your most successful people-based programs will be tied to your business fundamentals, because you'll have a sense across the organization of why you're implementing a diversity program."

For purely business reasons, he says, high-producers are a company's most valuable human resources regardless of their race, nationality, sexual orientation or other such characteristic. While it may not be a result of flagrant discrimination, minorities sometimes are left out of the so-called "old boy network" or overlooked because of cultural differences and therefore either denied advancement or driven away in frustration, he says.

"Your strategies have to be about getting the mix and attracting the mix. Then you also want to focus on retaining, developing and advancing them," Tapia says.

Achieving Diversity Through Skill Development

Diversity training often fails because it is too focused on high-level awareness and abstract ideals instead of actionable goals, says Tom Floyd, founder and CEO of Insight Educational Consulting, based in San Jose.

"It's all puppy dogs and rainbows, but doesn't necessarily get to the hands-on, tangible focus on skills that aren't necessarily tied to just diversity," says Floyd, who suggests that diversity training should focus on soft skills, such as effective communication and collaboration across cultural boundaries.

So while it may not be realistic to expect someone's core beliefs to change overnight, a D&I program should instead teach people effective ways to work with a diverse group of people, Floyd says. Focusing on skills that help employees become more tactful, compassionate and respectful without being preachy or merely politically correct, he says, should be the goal of any diversity-training program.

Measuring the development of these skills, though, is difficult. Floyd suggests companies conduct a quarterly "pulse check" to determine if its diversity and inclusion goals are being met, and says case studies and anecdotal evidence also can help gauge the effectiveness of D&I programs.

What a Successful D&I Program Looks Like

McDonald's Corp. has hosted workshops for niche groups within its organization since 1979, says Patricia Harris, the fast food chain's Global Chief Diversity Officer. For example, Women's Career Development workshops help women sell themselves for promotions within McDonald's and prepare for interviews. Other niche groups within McDonald's include the Hispanic Employee Network, the Asian Employee Network, the African American Council and McDonald's Gay and Lesbian Alliance Network.

"Part of why we have these workshops is to create an environment where people can talk about any issues they may have in the restaurants," Harris says. "How do you manage situations you may encounter as a woman or as a person of color?"

But McDonald's also makes sure the different networks work together and don't become too insular, Harris says. She introduced the White Male Forum, for example, "so that they could talk about diversity and inclusion issues in a safe environment." And in all forums, Harris makes sure people that are not otherwise part of the group are present in order to keep the dialogue open and not just "preaching to the choir."

All McDonald's employees are trained in the importance of diversity and inclusion, she says, an effort that is measured through regular employee surveys. One measure of success, Harris points out, is the diversity among McDonald's executives and board members, many of whom represent racial minorities and/or are women. While its CEO, Jim Skinner, is white, she says he "gets it" and makes sure diversity is part of any discussion about talent management.

Putting together a diversity council or task force is a great place to start, says Tapia. And any such group must include the CEO, if only as a sponsor, to be effective. After identifying areas that need improvement, this group can set periodic goals and strategies for achieving them, he says. For example, one strategy might be to communicate some nuances of different groups or cultures to middle managers.

"White males may have developed a belief that works for them about how strong leadership looks, but it may not work for women," Tapia says.

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– Patricia Harris, McDonald's Corp.*

At the heart of McDonald's D&I program is the goal of reflecting the diversity of the company's customers, Harris says, which ties directly to the bottom line.

"We try to represent the customers we serve, and we also want them to understand who we are," Harris says. "We have a terrific story to tell, both internally and externally."

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