3 Ways Leaders Can Step Into Accountability for Diversity and Inclusion

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In the past year, I've often heard the word accountability attached to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

Many leaders feel pressure to have an opinion on and speak to every issue in the news cycle. Employees — particularly colleagues of color, women and younger coworkers — are expecting their leaders to understand and address the challenges of social justice. They're asking:

Add in the complexity around the risks and disparate impacts of Covid-19, vaccinations and mask use, and we've got quite the accountability storm.

Our relationships with our employees and peers are now pressurized like never before. For many of us — particularly those from advantaged backgrounds — it's a shock. Some of us are muttering to ourselves: *I've never been expected to lead through DEI like this before.*

Let's look at what is causing these new expectations of us as leaders.

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Reasons for this new accountability around DEI

Powerful trends are driving this redefinition of leadership toward inclusive leadership. These trends are durable influences, and they will accelerate in the future.

Demographics

The 2020 Census revealed America's demographic destiny. Right now, Americans 18 and under are a mutual minority. The multiracial population is expanding. We ignore these aspects of segmentation in our talent strategy and customer connection at our own peril.

Metro over rural

56% of all people now live in or near cities, and the UN projects that almost 70% will do so in 30 years. This requires that we understand urban regions and that we focus on rural markets appropriately. City populations, by definition, are more diverse, and their dynamic cultures challenge our ability to succeed geographically.

Global markets and supply chains

The capability to source, sell and serve across national boundaries is vital. Working with cultural and language differences is a new norm for many industries and in organizations of every size. And people from around the world are coming into our geographic markets, so we don't have to sell "overseas" for our organizations to go global.

Technological acceleration

Virtually every business now relies on the use of technology to operate; tech universally drives efficiencies and speeds communication. Prospects read about your company on Glassdoor, customers watch the news to see your commitment to diversity,

ethical sourcing and fighting climate change, and employees argue about DEI on internal forums.

Broken trust

The previous trends plus increasing educational achievement are fueling the voice and agency of people who are tired of having disadvantages tied to their identities: women globally in the #MeToo movement, African Americans and those of other oppressed racial identities, younger generations concerned about climate change, the LGTBQ community and many more looking for social justice.

What's an accountable, inclusive leader to do in such a messy world, when you have a business to run and goals to hit?

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Three ways to step up

First, accept and affirm that all leaders must become inclusive leaders, including you.

Accountability is being personally responsible for the ways that you build trust, especially across differences in identities. Ask your people for their ideas to help the company become more responsive to unmet community needs. Revamp your leadership development curriculum so that every leader in your firm understands that inclusion is expected, supported and evaluated.

Visibly invest in deepening your DEI point of view.

Get involved with an employee resource group. Authentically and quietly check in with colleagues when current events may impact them or their loved ones personally. Learn how to talk about issues publicly and connect your understanding to the values of the organization. It's not enough to grow privately,

as crucial as that is. There’s a balance to be struck between ally theatre and the need for people to see you lead with DEI publicly. This includes gracefully recovering from misses and mistakes, because perfection is not always attainable.

Build your brand as an inclusive leader, by improving systems and culture.

Your leadership brand is how people see you and choose to follow you. They will do so because inclusive leaders focus on reducing bias and generating opportunities in hiring and advancement decisions. Inclusive leaders are accountable and perform for results. Ally work must not be performative (i.e. insincere, superficial or for the sake of appearances).

Are you establishing a reputation for managing a team with a healthy mix of people? Are you retaining talent because people feel a sense of belonging and community? Leading inclusively will burnish your brand.

Inclusive leaders do not resist new accountabilities. Instead, we explore how the pressures in DEI can invigorate our careers, deliver results and grow our culture. Our people are asking us to answer for the ways we build trust.

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