5 Ways to Ensure You Have True Diversity Within Your Business

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The government defines diversity as “the range of similarities and differences each individual brings to the workplace, including but not limited to national origin, language, race, color, disability, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, veteran status, and family structures.” Too often, I’ve seen this diluted to the introduction of one woman and one minority to the company board of directors. Is this really the pinnacle of a diverse company foundation? What about the rest of the workforce? Is diversity really just a matter of fulfilling quotas?

In my experience, true diversity enriches a company, but it must be the real deal. It has to be embraced from the boardroom to the mailroom if it’s going to thrive. After all, how diverse is your company, really, if all the diversity is sitting at the bottom of the pay scale while the boardroom remains unwaveringly similar to 19th-century men’s clubs, minus the Victorian suits? Here, I want to explore how companies can nurture diversity for a more rewarding and successful operation.

Opening doors requires open minds

I've always lamented how the government definition of diversity, which is really quite nice, often becomes distilled to employing a few representative "types" to achieve the "diversity-approved" rubber stamp. That's just not the level of diversity that I'm hoping to foster. But, to create a truly diverse team that goes beyond employing a certain number of minorities and a certain number of women, you have to have an open mind and be willing to look at diversity from more complex angles.

For instance, I am from a communist country. We view opportunities differently than someone who grew up in a comfortable upper-middle-class American home or a wealthy home where people were raised with a C-suite mentality. When piecing together a team, I think it's fine to maintain a presence of people groomed for executive-level roles, but it's also crucial to hire people who come from different socio-economic backgrounds and represent entirely different lifestyles, values and cultures because it lends a richness to the company soup.

In order for these diverse teams to work well and meet their potential, however, the leadership needs to embrace an open mind so that when conflicting ideas collide, good solutions can be found. People have to be willing to embrace new ideas or create hybrid solutions based on the contributions of their diverse workforce.

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It takes all ages

Age is an important aspect of a company's diversity, and it's one that's sometimes overlooked as we prowl the candidate pool

for “experience” and “expertise.” I believe there’s real value in bringing on younger employees to work alongside the older members — perhaps not at the board level when experience is so integral to the role, but certainly in other pivotal areas of the company.

Take marketing, for example. Right now, we know Gen Xers are major buyers, but we can easily see that millennials and Gen Z are coming up the ranks. Are we considering how to best market to these customers and clients? We need young employees to help us navigate the world of TikTok influencers and up-and-coming social-media trends. We need their representation because it’s important to our company’s future and its current success as a diverse employer.

Don’t ignore background and upbringing

When hiring, many companies focus on a prescribed set of questions and don’t really get personal. In fact, getting personal can be tricky and altogether inappropriate in some interview situations. And yet, when we come across a candidate with an unusual upbringing, it may ring our diversity bell, so to speak. Someone with different religious views or someone who grew up in a culture completely different from the rest of the team’s can add a wealth of unique input to the department. Simply put, diversity mandates instruct us not to discriminate against people, but there’s another way to view diversity. These mandates could propel us to look for talent in new and fresh quarters, to actively create a team that is reflective of people with true differences.

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Focus on your foundation: the board

I've mentioned the board already and how many companies continue to hit the minimum "diversity quota." I see the board as a company's foundation. This is a great place to focus on diversity and inclusion because it sets the tone for the company. It also demonstrates to the workforce that it has a representative board that reflects the company's diversity values. When the board is diverse, it's often easier for the rest of the company to follow suit because there's an atmosphere of diversity that permeates, and should permeate, from one department to the next.

Interviews: evaluate personalities

Finally, I'd point out the necessity of interviewing with personality in mind. Sure, everyone is different, but there are personalities out there that are going to thrive in your diverse climate and personalities that just might not be the ideal fit for your operation or business culture. That's okay, except that it costs a lot of money to hire and onboard new employees. After making that investment, you hope they are going to stick around and grow with you.

I like to find people who are open-minded, embrace diversity and inclusion, and are eager to work at my business for more than just a paycheck. I want them to thrive in my setting, and for that to happen, they need to be enthusiastic about much more than the job title and salary. And, of course, different personalities can bring an exciting mix to discussions, so when building teams, we often interview with personality in mind. Is this person a leader? Is this person a born collaborator? We don't want an entire team of extroverts or an entire team of introverts. We want a mix because that's how we achieve a terrific balance that results in truly dynamic outcomes.

It’s important for leaders to know that diversity is something companies should be thinking about all the time – not only when they review the policy on an annual basis. It needs constant nurturing or the current team stagnates. These tips can help you nurture a diverse board and workforce, but you have to exercise them routinely. When you do, you’ll find that diversity isn’t just words on your company website – it’s a value that lives in who you are and what you do each day.

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