6 Signs Your Diversity and Inclusion Program Needs an Overhaul

Review this checklist of danger signs that your diversity and inclusion efforts need improvement before it’s too late

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For all the lip service provided to diversity and inclusion — and in a year marked by pledges for change in the wake of George Floyd and the #BlackLivesMatter movement — few companies are making progress driving a greater mix of race and gender throughout key divisions and senior ranks. This lack of progress is being noticed by employees and having a negative ripple effect on corporate growth, turnover and profits.

For example, in a recent report analyzing data collected from 83,000 employees at hundreds of U.S. organizations undergoing diversity and inclusion trainings, my company found:

- Only half of all employees believe their organization has a genuine commitment to inclusion.
- Just 43% of employees say they can consistently be their authentic selves at work.
- Only 33% of people say their company leaders work hard to create a sense of belonging.

The good news is that smart founders have no reason to be in the dark about how their employees really feel and the progress they've actually made toward their DEI goals. There are several key indicators to measure health in this area — and warning signs to watch out for.

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Lack of an intentional system for decision-making

When companies don't have structured processes, they create the risk of biased outcomes. Take hiring and promotions, for example. Hirings that are based on "gut feelings" can often lead to favoring candidates who are most similar to the interviewer, not necessarily the best candidate for the job. Hiring managers should identify a specific matrix of core skills weighted by importance, and should use the same questions for each candidate. Right now, many are not. Only 45% of employees in our survey said their team uses a structured process for conducting interviews.

Low level of demonstrated appreciation for differences in your employee base.

Valuing differences is the ability to go beyond acknowledging and accepting one another's differences, but actually creating the environment that allows diversity to be seen and to flourish. This goes beyond simply having diverse teams. That's an important step, to be sure. But there's a reason we talk about diversity and inclusion. Once you have a diverse workforce, workers need to understand that you value them and their differences. We found that although four in five people believe diverse teams make better decisions, only one in five

believe their managers truly value their differences. That gap is a sure sign that true inclusion might not be happening.

Leadership that has neglected to actively put their privilege to work to enact change

Allyship involves using your privilege to make a difference for those who do not have the same opportunities. If your organization does not have diverse leadership, being an ally shrinks the gap between those in power and the people who are impacted by their decisions. This is particularly critical when there may be disagreement. We found that only 30% of employees feel comfortable disagreeing in a meeting. Far too often people who are underrepresented or undervalued have to think twice about when and how often to speak up. Company leaders who don't recognize this run the risk of stifling good ideas and making employees feel unheard. It takes work, but it's so important that managers and leaders use their power and privilege to elevate the voices of those who feel as though they have less of one.

Related: 5 Ways Entrepreneurs of Color Can Determine an Ally's Authenticity

Team members tend to be siloed — and often look similar to each other in terms of demographics and backgrounds

Deeper knowledge of the people around us makes us strong problem solvers and better team members. Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen, especially in the higher ranks of companies. We found that less than half of employees report

having diverse executive teams in their workplace. When team members look and sound alike, there's a tendency toward "group think". That can lead to decisions that ignore the needs and concerns of the different races, genders, ages, sexual orientations and other characteristics of people who aren't represented.

Lack of curiosity or low empathy

Curiosity and empathy help to mitigate in-group/out-group dynamics, which are "us vs. them" behaviors that create barriers to working with others in a positive and productive way. Sadly, we found that less than half of all employees believe that managers show curiosity and empathy. Empathy for someone's situation often creates better collaboration and problem solving because it improves responsiveness to both problems and to great ideas. When people feel empathy, they feel understood, more socially connected, and their anxieties diminish. Simply put, they feel like they belong.

Employees who don't feel they can be their authentic selves at work

Energy spent pretending to be something you are not is energy wasted. When employees feel they can be their authentic selves, they can focus on work instead of focusing on trying to fit in. Academic research has found that people who feel authentic at work have better job satisfaction and are more engaged at the office. But, as I mentioned earlier, our tracking of worker sentiment found that only 43% of employees feel like they can be their authentic selves at work.

"Great," you say. "This all makes sense. But how am I supposed to tell if my employees are being their authentic selves at work? How do I know if my managers are showing empathy?" I firmly believe that you can't fix what you don't measure.

Companies that routinely and anonymously ask their employees about their work experience as it relates to diversity and inclusion can set benchmarks and measure progress. And beyond just measuring how well they’re performing on these six indicators, employers must actively work to train their teams on the value of inclusion, and understand that inclusion is a skill that can be learned.

People spend years learning how to do business in other countries where they need to navigate different cultural expectations, communication styles and life experiences. Learning how to work inclusively is similar. It takes years of experience to learn how to work productively with people who think differently, communicate differently, have different life experiences, etc. And if we approach inclusion as a skill to master, then we can identify the key social indicators that show proficiency, or the need for improvement.

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