

Creating Inclusion – It’s More Than Meets the Eye

By Dr. William A. Guillory



Expert Forum



The most recent battle cry in diversity is “inclusion” or “creating an inclusive culture.” In reality, creating inclusion goes beyond a good business case for diversity and changing people’s behavior. Most of all, it involves a significant shift (or transformation) in the individual and collective mind-sets of the work force.

In the early years of diversity, and continuing through today, there was a naïve assumption, “we can’t dictate how you think, but we can insist on how you behave.” Behavior modification, in and of itself, does not produce irreversible change — and most often, it does not produce change at all. It is vital to understand that the most important aspect of creating inclusion involves a transformation in our beliefs about human equality and cultural differences — namely human biases and prejudices, and ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the human tendency to believe that one’s own way of believing and thinking is superior to others.

Any organization that has been seriously instituting cultural transformation has come to realize that the major effort involves the creation of commitment — particularly from leadership. Commitment, from a human perspective, is the result of realizing that one is not superior or inferior to anyone else — by race, sex, ethnicity, ability, or culture. Such a realization resolves the underlying fear that we tend to have adopted relating to differences and allows us to create relationships based upon honesty, trust, and mutual support. As a result, major drivers for change become ethical and moral motivations — or simply, the inner realization that diversity is “the right thing to do.” Stated differently, it is a moral violation of that person’s ethics, as a human being, to come to work everyday and participate in a workplace culture where systemic discrimination occurs.

If, in fact, morals and ethics become major drivers for cultural change, it is important to recognize that they cannot be legislated or mandated. There is something within each of us, at a level beyond what we have learned to believe and value, that must be “recovered” to want to treat others with honesty and authenticity. Equity of opportunity can only exist where there is the significant absence of the fear of differences. In a business environment, the dominant fear is viewing leadership and management as a “zero sum game.” Thus, the fear is centered around the loss of domination, control, and power. The alternative is to view power as synonymous with knowledge. Therefore, power expands as knowledge expands. Knowledge, in the form of integrated information, creativity, and innovation, is the “life blood” of an organization’s continuing success. Creating an environment of inclusion certainly begins with education (a business case for diversity), sensitivity and awareness, and suggested behavioral changes.

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These are all necessary, but not sufficient to achieve inclusion. Even the incorporation of changes in succession planning, work practices, and leadership/management accountabilities will have little lasting impact if they do not facilitate a transformation in thinking. If such changes do not create transformation, they will achieve the French saying, “plus ça la change, plus ça la même chosé!” (The more things change, the more they stay the same!)

The key element in driving inclusion is a leader who is morally committed to diversity and is clear about its business value. The core driver within that individual is his or her commitment to equity of opportunity for everyone. As Gandhi has stated, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” Leadership is being the future state of inclusion and behaving as though it has already been accomplished. Such behaviors have the power of literally “pulling” the organization into the future state. These behaviors have the power to facilitate cultural transformation. Organizations where significant cultural change has occurred because of the type of leader I have described include: Xerox (David Kearns), TDIndustries (Jack Lowe, Jr.), Avon (Jim Preston), Southwest Airlines (Herb Kelleher), Kellogg (Carlos Gutierrez), Sempra Energy (Bill Wood), EDS (Les Aberthal), and others for which I do not have personal experience.

The stepwise process of achieving an inclusive culture is the following:

- 1) Establish a baseline – conduct a comprehensive cultural survey (which integrates performance, inclusion, climate, and work-life balance).
- 2) Select and prioritize the issues that lead to the greatest breakthrough in transforming the culture.
- 3) Create a 3-5 year diversity strategic plan that is tied to the organizational strategic business objectives.
- 4) Secure leadership’s endorsement and financial commitment for the 3-5 year plan.
- 5) Establish measurable leadership and management objectives accountable to top leadership.
- 6) Implement the plan, recognizing that surprises and setbacks will occur along the way.
- 7) Continue training in concert with the skills and competencies necessary to successfully achieve the diversity action plan.
- 8) Conduct a follow-up survey 1 to 1-1/2 years after initiation of the plan to determine how inclusion has changed.