

Employee Resource Groups; challenges and opportunities



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Employee Resource Groups or ERGs, are organized networks of employees in organizations who have similar demographics, interests, or life experiences, i.e., veterans, women, Gen Y, people over 40, African-American, people with various religious affiliations, South Asian, etc.

Early on, many ERGs began as affinity groups formed to provide social and career support for their members. As diversity and inclusion initiatives in organizations evolved, affinity groups in those organizations have evolved into Employee Resource Groups.

Employee Resource Groups can play a key role in the success of an individual, a group, and the whole organization when they are actual resources as opposed to just an affinity or social groups.

Increasingly leaders in organizations are seeing the value of Employee Resource Groups, and developing more strategic relationships with them.

This generally takes the form of executive sponsorship by one or more people in leadership positions, and who often are not all members of the particular group the ERG represents.

In order for the whole organization to benefit from its ERGs, executive sponsors need to be actively involved and not just a sponsor on paper.

That can be a challenge, and an exciting opportunity for mutual growth.

Executive sponsors may have one or more of these three challenges

- If they have little or no experience with the group in the ERG they may be afraid of saying the wrong thing
- They may lack the communication skills needed to bridge the gap at first
- They're unclear about their role and what sponsorship means in practice

Employee Resource Groups may have one or more of these three challenges when developing a relationship with executive sponsors

- If there are no senior level people in the ERG, there may be some discomfort giving feedback and making requests to someone at the executive level
- The ERG may not have evolved into a resource, and is still an affinity group, and not sure how to become a resource for the organization
- The ERG does not know how to leverage the relationship with the executive sponsor

Here are five ways to ensure the success of executive sponsorship and create opportunities for individual and organizational growth

- Be clear about why you want to sponsor a particular group. It could be because it's a group you have no experience with, and recognize the opportunity to learn.
- Meet with ERG leaders and ask them what they want you to know about the group, and how you can provide support. Spend time getting to know ERG leaders and members as well. Go to coffee or lunch at a place off site. Listen completely, without interruption and ask questions. Be open about what you don't know.
- Agree on expectations, theirs and yours, and be willing to stretch yourself out of your comfort zone
- Attend as many meetings and functions of the group as you are able. Besides learning, you'll be setting an example for the rest of the organization, because too often, other employees think that ERG functions are only for members of that group. The more employees learn and experience having meaningful interactions with other employees who are different than them, the easier it will be to communicate and provide excellent service for customers from diverse backgrounds.

As you get to know people in the ERG, you'll become aware of any unconscious bias you had in the past, and the faster you'll let go of those unconscious biases. In addition, as you let go of old biases, you'll come to realize that people belong to more than just one group.

The LGBT ERG may have the 30-year-old lesbian whose family is from El Salvador, the 50-year-old white gay man born and raised in California, and the 40-year-old African-American transgender woman from Wisconsin.

This is an exciting opportunity for you to become more culturally intelligent, help the individuals in the ERG become more successful, and be a business resource that the organization depends on to help grow its market share.

Simma Lieberman helps organizations become more profitable by creating inclusive cultures where people do their best work. Leaders contact her when they want to develop and implement a strategy that leverages the skills and talents of employees at

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